

THE FASTEST GUN IN THE WEST IS BACK



SUDDEN

THE RANGE ROBBERS



OLIVER STRANGE

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CHAPTER I

The desert! As far as the eye could reach it stretched, alternating swells and levels of greyish-white sand, broken only by occasional ridges and hummocks of sun-scorched rock, protruding from the surface like the bared bones of a giant skeleton. Stunted mesquite, sagebrush, and the tortured forms of cactus, weird of leaf and beautiful of flower, were the only evidence of vegetation. Over all danced a shimmering heat which, flung down from a brazen sky and reflected back by the sand, made the eyes ache and the brain dizzy.

Following a faintly-defined trail came a wiry little cow-pony, pacing wearily but steadily through the burning sand, and picking its way without the apparent assistance of its rider, who, humped forward in the saddle, seemed oblivious of everything.

An hour passed, and the pony's ears pricked up and its pace quickened slightly. Aware of this, the rider looked up and saw that the weary desert tramp was at last coming to an end. On the horizon now the vivid blue of the sky deepened to an almost black serrated line, which he knew to be a range of hills. Far as they still were, they carried a message of hope, and the traveler pressed on.

Gradually the character of the desert changed. The sand became dotted with an occasional scrub-oak and clumps of bunch-grass, while the mesquite bushes were bigger and more numerous. Another hour of steady plodding, and the edge of the desert was reached. The trail entered the foothills, twisting and turning as though to escape the grasping tentacles of the sand, which, like an encroaching sea, sought to engulf it.

A whirring rattle, and a venomous flat head shot into view from the roots of a mesquite bush at the side of the trail. Instantly the pony jumped sideways into the air, coming down with all four legs stiff as rods. The rider, taken unawares, was almost hurled from the saddle, but gripping the animal with instinctive knees, kept his seat. His left hand streaked to his side, there was a sharp report, and the snake's head flew from its body. Replacing the smoking weapon, the man applied himself to quieting his mount, which was again attempting to buck. Snatching off his hat, he slammed the pony over the ears with it, and a cloud of alkali dust enveloped the pair.

'Playin' yu never saw a rattler before, eh?' he said, in a slow, soft drawl. 'Thought I'd done broke yer of that sort o' foolishness, yu animated bone-bag.'

Another larrup from the hat accompanied the words, and the pony, changing its tactics, reached round and took a snap at the chap-covered leg of the rider, only to encounter the thrust-forward heavy wooden stirrup with a jar, which effectually discouraged any further attempt of the kind.

'I shore thought yu knew better than to try that,' admonished the soft voice, sarcastically. 'Now yu have had yore play, s'pose we get on: I'm 'bout as dry as a second-hand sermon.'

They paced along over a plain trail through the increasing vegetation, and presently the

animal, scenting water, began to trot. Passing along a narrow gully with precipitous sides, they emerged on the banks of a stream, shallow enough now, but with a wide sandy bed which showed there were times when it might justly be called a river; and indeed, when the snow on the mountains melted, Two Feather Creek became a raging torrent.

The horse walked into the water and drank eagerly. The man only gazed at it reflectively, a sardonic smile on his lips.

'An hour back, yes, an' thank yu,' he soliloquized, 'but to spoil a thirst like mine with that slush now. Why, it can't be more than a mile to a drink.'

Starting his unwilling mount, he rode to the other bank and followed the trail across an open stretch of prairie at an easy lope. In a little while he came in sight of a collection of wood and adobe structures strung along the two sides of a dusty wallow called by courtesy a street.

'That'll be Hatchett's Folly,' he muttered. 'It shore looks it.'

Years before, a wandering prospector, finding gold on the banks of the Two Feather, made for the nearest settlement, got gloriously drunk, and proclaimed a new Eldorado. Scores of eager fortune-hunters followed him, and a town sprang up with the mushroom speed of Western enterprise. But the gold proved hard to find and scanty in quantity; many of the seekers got killed in quarrels among themselves, or by raiding redskins, and others migrated in disgust. The town of Hatchett's, named after the discoverer, became Hatchett's Folly, and only the coming of the cattle saved it from extinction.

To the newcomer the place presented the familiar characteristics of the frontier settlements. The same squalid shacks, litter of tin cans, board sidewalks, and ever-prevailing alkali dust. On the largest of the buildings was a rudely-painted sign which read: 'The Folly Saloon.'

'That shore is the best name for a s'loon I've struck yet,' commented the stranger, as he dismounted and secured his pony to the hitching-rail outside. 'Town appears to be 'bout dead,' he added, and in fact, with the exception of two men loafing in front of a board edifice further along the street, which called itself an 'hotel,' there was no one in sight.

The bar of the 'Folly' occupied the back of the room, facing the entrance, a strategic position which gave the barkeeper an opportunity of preparing for trouble before it arrived. At either end of the space in front of it were the tables used for the various games of chance promoted by the establishment, or desired by the customers. At one of these tables two men were playing poker. The only other occupant—the dispenser of liquids—instantly transferred his interest from the game to the new arrival.

He saw a tall, lithe man of well under thirty, with a clean-shaven face tanned to the color of new copper, keen steel-blue eyes, and an out-thrust chin which spoke eloquently of determination. There was a suggestion of humor in the little lines round the eyes and at the corners of the firm lips. The leather chaps, blue shirt with loosely-knotted neckerchief, wide-brimmed Stetson and high-heeled boots, denoted the cowpuncher, but the heavy belt with two guns—the holsters tied down to facilitate easy extraction—might mean the gunman.

The barkeeper absorbed all these details while the object of his scrutiny was reaching the bar. He was a quick observer—the nature of his occupation required it. Without a word the

stranger spun a dollar upon the counter, and the barman pushed forward a bottle and a glass.

'No, seh,' said the customer softly. 'I just naturally hate drinkin' alone, an' yu are havin' one with me, sabe?'

The barkeeper grinned understandingly, added another glass, and replaced the bottle with one from the back shelf. The visitor poured himself a generous three-finger dose, sent it down his throat at a gulp, and refilled the glass.

'Good stuff,' he said approvingly. 'That desert o' yores is some fierce.'

'I don't claim to own her, but she shore is,' replied the other. 'Come a long ways?'

'Right from where I started,' was the reply, with a smile which robbed the snub of its venom.

'An' I reckon yu will keep a-goin' till yu git there,' said the barkeeper pleasantly, falling into the other's humor.

'Yu hit her, first pop,' rejoined the stranger, adding, 'I'm just havin' a look at the country.'

'Well, she's shore worth it, in parts, Mister—. What did yu say yore name was?' said the man of liquids, taking another chance.

'I didn't say,' smiled the newcomer. 'Yu can call me Green.' 'I've heard of more appropriate labels, but it's yore bet, an' she goes as she lays,' agreed the barkeeper. 'I answers to Silas my own self. Here's how!'

They drank again, and the conversation turned to less personal topics. The stranger learned that the country round was interested only in cattle, the two principal ranches being the Frying Pan and the Y Z.

'Then there's the Double X up in the hills, but that's only a little one,' Silas explained. 'If it's a job yo're huntin', I've heard that the Y Z can use another puncher. The old man is all right, but the foreman, Blaynes, is a blister. That's one o' the Y Z boys playin' there.'

He indicated the younger of the card-players, little more than a boy, whose face was getting more and more solemn as his hard-earned money passed to his opponent. The stranger looked at the pair for a moment and then said:

'Reckon he'll be a "wiser head" before he's much older. Who's the hard citizen?'

The barkeeper laughed at the pleasantry, though it was a joke he heard every time a 'wise-head' puncher came to town, and then replied to the question in a whisper:

'The hard citizen—an' yu shore have got him right—is Poker Pete, a slick man with cards or guns by reputation. If yo're aimin' to stay in these parts yu might remember that he's got friends hereabouts.'

'That so?' queried the other nonchalantly. 'Well, I guess some folk around here ain't particular who they mix up with.' They watched the play in silence for a while. The gambler was winning, but beyond an occasional gleam in his beady eyes, his face betrayed no emotion whatever. He was a big-made man, beefy, but in poor condition, and the rusty black coat he wore seemed curiously out of keeping with the trousers thrust into top boots, and the slouched hat. His opponent, who had evidently visited the bar on more than one occasion, betrayed a lamentable lack of that stoicism so essential to good poker-playing, and profane expressions of joy or disgust punctuated his game. At length, with a hearty curse, he slammed down the cards, rose to his feet, and cried:

'That lets me out. Yu done corralled the whole herd, every cent of three months' pay, 'cept what went for irrigatin'. I never see such luck. Am I good for a drink, Silas?'

'Have one on the house,' replied that worthy, and passed the bottle. The gambler did not speak or move. Idly ruffling the pack in his hands, he glanced at the stranger. It was an invitation.

'Shore I'll take a whirl with yu,' said the visitor, and seated himself in the chair the cowboy had vacated.

He won the cut for deal and the game commenced. Both men played cautiously, each testing the strength of the other. Bets ruled small, and at the end of half an hour there was but little between the players. Then the man who called himself Green picked up a hand, looked at it, and said: 'S'pose we get outa the infant class an' whoop her up a bit.' 'Suits me,' replied his opponent.

The amount of the bets increased, and the stranger won steadily. The gambler appeared to lose a little of his immobility as misfortune continued to dog him. 'Luck's dead out,' he grumbled, as he pushed across another twenty dollars, 'but it's bound to change, an' I'll get yu yet.' The possibility of seeing an expert trimmed had drawn Silas from behind the bar, and he now stood with the young puncher, both closely watching the game. The gambler, who had now lost about a hundred dollars, dealt. Green glanced at his cards, laid them face down on the table, and said: 'bettin' fifty—in the dark.'

'I'm seein' that an' raisin' her as much,' was the instant reply. 'Come again,' said Green, pushing out another fifty.

'Which makes her two hundred,' retorted Poker Pete, and reached for the pack. 'Yu want any cards?'

'Put 'em up!' came the sharp command, and the astonished gambler looked up into the threatening muzzle of an unwavering Colt.

'What th' hell...' he began, but nevertheless his hands reached for the roof: it seemed a safer position for argument.

The other stretched forward, and with his left hand extracted a gun from its place of concealment under Pete's armpit.

'Keep 'em up,' he said menacingly, and then, to the two onlookers, 'Yu see, he dealt me three kings, an' I've a hunch there's three aces in his own hand. He reckons I'll take two cards, so he fixes the other king and a low one top o' the deck, with the other ace comin' next, so that whether I take one or two, or none whatever, he's got me beat every way there is. Now, seh, 'this to the barkeeper—I'll be obliged if you will turn up his hand, an' then the three top cards o' the pack. If I'm wrong, I'll eat dirt, an' the stakes are his, but if I'm right'

He broke off grimly and watched Silas expose the cards. They proved to be placed exactly as he had predicted. The cheat also watched the operation with an expression in which fear and hatred were curiously mingled. The test over, the stranger looked at him with plain contempt.

'Yu a gambler,' he sneered. 'Why, yo're only a cheap tin-horn. Yu don't know nothin' about poker. I've seen boys o' fourteen who could skin yu at the game. How much did he take outa yu?' This to the previous player.

'Hundred an' twenty,' replied the puncher. 'But I ain't kickin'—I lost

'Lost nothin',' retorted Green. 'When yu go up agin a stacked deck yu don't lose—yu just get robbed.'

He pushed the amount from the money lying on the table, pocketed the remainder, and then holstered his gun. Instantly the gambler sprang to his feet, his right hand dropped to his neck, there was a rapid movement, and a heavy knife flashed past the stranger's ear, burying itself with a dull thud in the log wall. The man whom death had missed by a bare inch looked at the poisonous face of his would-be murderer and laughed cynically.

'Ain't there nothin' yu can do well?' he asked, and then, 'I shot a rattler on my way here, an' I just can't go on wastin' good cartridges on vermin.'

With the words he leapt suddenly, clearing the intervening table, and as his feet touched the floor, his fist, with all the momentum of his body behind it, caught the gambler on the jaw, lifted him clear of the ground and hurled him with a crash against the wall. There he lay, limp and huddled, only the hatred in his eyes showing that he still lived. The visitor forbore to add to the punishment.

'Fade,' he said, and with a muttered curse the beaten man climbed slowly to his feet and staggered from the saloon. Not until he had vanished did the grim features of the victor relax, and then, 'Where do I eat?' he asked.

'Down at the hotel, with me,' said the puncher eagerly. 'Gosh! I'll be proud to know a man who can hit like that. Larry Barton is my brand.' The other man smiled at the boy's whole-hearted invitation, and after seeing to the needs of his horse, accompanied his new friend to the hotel, where they dispatched a satisfying meal.

'If yu got any notion o' settlin' down around here yu want to remember that Poker has the name for never forgettin' or forgivin',' Larry said. The remark amounted to a question, and the other man rolled a cigarette with meticulous care before he replied.

'That sort o' makes me eager to stay,' he said quietly. 'But I gotta get a job—I ain't no plutocrat.'

'Fine,' said Larry. 'All yu hey to do is fork yore cayuse an' come along o' me to the Y Z. I heard the Old Man sayin' he wanted another puncher. I reckon yu understand cattle.'

'I expect I've got notions thataway,' was the smiling reply.

'Well, the Y Z is one good ranch,' returned the boy. 'Blaynes, the foreman, is shore tough, but the Old Man is all right, an' his daughter, Miss Norry, makes a short-sighted man's life a burden.'

'Good-looker, eh?' queried the stranger.

'Good everythin',' was the enthusiastic answer. 'But shucks, what's the use? I'm only a cowhand. Say, we'd better get agoin'.'

CHAPTER II

SIMON PETTER—more generally referred to as 'Old Simon'—the owner of the Y Z ranch, was a grizzled, stoutish man in the early fifties. His face was good-natured, but in the rounded chin there was a hint of weakness, which a short beard did not fully conceal. He had the repute of being a fair man in his dealings, and was generally liked in the district. He stood now on the broad verandah of the ranch-house, apprising the man Larry had enthusiastically presented to him, with a brief account of what happened at the 'Folly.'

'Poker Pete, eh?' he said. 'Well, he's had it comin' to him for quite a while. So yu rough-housed him, eh?'

'Maybe I didn't think I was handlin' aigs,' said the stranger, with a grin.

Simon liked the smile and the competent look of power in the wearer of it.

'An' yu want a job?' he continued.

'Why no, seh,' replied the drawling voice. 'I ain't near so broke as that, but I'm willin' to take one.'

'What's yore name?' came the blunt question.

'Green is the only label I can produce at the moment. Yu will find I answer to that as well as another.'

Old Simon looked at the steady narrowed eyes, and his own twinkled. In that country names were nothing—more than one good man finding it expedient to sail under false colors. Anyway, the applicant looked capable, and he wanted men of that stamp just now.

'The pay is forty a month, an' grub is good,' he said. 'Larry will take yu down an' introduce yu to the boys. My foreman, Blaynes, is away; yu can report to him in the mornin'.'

'Say, boss, I told him fifty per,' interjected Barton.

'Yore mouth opens too easy,' retorted Old Simon. 'It's forty for newcomers. Take it or leave it.'

'Suits me,' said the new man, and was turning to accompany Barton when the angry scream of a horse shattered the silence.

In a moment they saw the animal rushing towards them from the corral, bucking, sun-fishing, weaving—using every device of the 'bad' horse to unseat or destroy its rider. Half-fainting, but clinging desperately to the saddle, was a young girl, her face white beneath the tan, and her red-gold hair in a cloud round her head. It was obvious that her strength was nearly spent, and that she would be thrown and savaged by the maddened beast. The new hand acted without hesitation. Running swiftly forward, he made a sudden spring at the horse's head, and avoiding the flying forefeet by a miracle, gripped the reins by the bit.

Instantly the brute tried to rear, with the intention of falling backwards, but the man's iron strength pulled the head down, though it was all he could do to keep his footing. A quick snatch, and his right hand closed over and gripped the nostrils of the animal. It screamed with rage, and the great teeth clashed in a savage attempt to bite. But the clutch tightened, and, subdued for the moment, the horse snood quivering.

'Lift her down, Larry,' came the crisp command. No sooner had the cowboy got the half-senseless girl clear than Green, releasing the grip of his right hand, leapt into the empty saddle. This fresh outrage stirred the animal to an instant renewal of activity. It commenced bucking with redoubled fury, swapping ends, and employing, as Larry phrased it, 'all the old tricks, an' some new ones,' in its endeavor to injure the man on its back. The trio of onlookers watched the struggle with bated breath.

'He's a shore-enough killer, boss,' said the cowboy.

'That man knows his business,' replied Old Simon, his face pale yet with the fear he had felt for his daughter. The maddened horse was now leaping and twisting with a speed and suddenness which almost baffled the sight, yet still the rider kept his seat. His lean face, jaw grimly set, snapped back with each jolt, but the cruel bit, jammed to the back of the animal's mouth by arms of steel, prevented it from getting its head down. As though realizing this, the horse suddenly stood straight up on its hind legs. In another second it would have been on its back and the rider crushed to death, but, as Old Simon had said, the man knew his business. Down between the creature's ears crashed the loaded end of the quirt, with a force that jarred the brute almost into sensibility. Another attempt met with the same treatment, and, with a sharp scream of pain and rage, the horse darted for the open plain. The rancher turned to the girl, who, pale and shaky, was now somewhat recovered.

'What were yu doin' up on Blue Devil, Norry?' he asked. 'Ain't I told yu not to touch him?'

'Yes, Dad; but you know I can ride, and I didn't think there was a horse I couldn't manage,' the girl replied.

'Well, yu know now there is, an' yu keep away from him in future,' retorted the old man grimly. 'By the way, who helped yu rope an' saddle him?'

'Now, Dad,' she replied, with a laugh in which a sob was oddly mingled, 'do you think I'd tell?' Then, as her father growled an oath, she slipped her arm coaxingly through his, and added, 'You mustn't be angry with the boys, Dad; they just have to do what I say, you know,

and Blue was as good as gold at first.' The ranch-owner replied with a non-committal grunt, and stood staring out over the open country. Presently came the drumming of hoofs, and soon the roan appeared, still running fast, but entirely under control, and evidently, for the time at least, a beaten horse. His rider, reining in, jumped lightly down, and stood stroking the heaving flanks. Simon stepped forward.

'I'm obliged to yu,' he said simply, and with a nod in the direction of Blue Devil. 'What do yu think of him?'

'Grandest hoss I've ever crossed,' was the instant reply. 'But yu won't never make a lady's pet of him.'

'I ain't aimin' to,' retorted Old Simon. 'I once said I'd give that hoss to anyone that could ride him, an' I reckon that's why this girl o' mine was disobeyin' orders. He's yourn, an' it's fifty per for newcomers sometimes. Sabe.'

'I'll be proud to have the hoss, an' yu'll find I earn my pay,' was the quiet reply.

'I have to thank you too for saving, perhaps, my life,' Norry said, stepping forward with outstretched hand. The stranger took and held it for a moment, looking gravely into the deep blue eyes. Then he said: 'Why, it don't need mentionin',' and turned away.

The girl watched him as he followed Larry to the corral, leading Blue Devil, who went docilely enough. She was rather puzzled by his abrupt departure; men, as a rule, were in no hurry to leave her. She did not think he had meant to be rude, and yet—her father's voice broke in upon her reflections.

'Now yu mind what I'm sayin', girl, an' when I tell yu to keep away from a four-legged earthquake yu gotta obey. It takes a bit to throw a scare into me, but I'll own up I was frightened good and plenty.'

'All right, Dad, I'll promise,' the girl replied. 'I was scared good and plenty myself. I wonder where the new man comes from?'

'Dunno,' said Old Simon. 'It ain't reckoned good form or good sense to be too curious in these parts, but he's worth his pay if he never does anythin' else for me.'

'You're just a dear,' Noreen responded tenderly, hugging him by the arm as they went into the house.

Meanwhile, the two punchers, having unsaddled and turned Blue Devil loose in the corral, proceeded to the bunkhouse, arriving just in time for the evening meal. Larry presented his new friend to the outfit:

'A new "Wise head," boys—name of Green; but I wouldn't recommend any of yu to gamble on that same cog-no-men meanin' much.'

The presentation elicited a laugh. Some of the men nodded, others vouchsafed a single word, 'Howdy,' and all of them went on eating. Green and his companion slid into a couple of empty places at the long table and tackled the food as though their last meal was a distant memory.

At length, when the plates had been cleared and replenished, coffee-cups emptied and refilled, the men began to find another use for their jaws. Green saw covert glances sent in his direction, and divined that he was being 'looked over,' and that presently he would be 'tried out.' Larry knew what was coming, and hugged himself mentally for not having 'gassed' about the new man's performances.

'They're good boys—some of 'em; but it'll shore improve their eddication if they josh him,' he reflected.

A red-headed, merry-faced cowboy, who was called 'Ginger' because he hated it and had foolishly allowed that fact to become known, opened the attack.

'Gee, stranger, but I'm right glad yu happened along,' he said. 'It'll save me somethin'.'

Green looked up inquiringly. 'Shoot,' he said, with a smile.

'Well,' began Ginger, 'Yu see, that Y Z has the meanest hoss this side o' the Mexican border, an' it's a custom o' the ranch that the latest comer has to try an' ride that hoss within a certain time, unless a new hand drifts in to take the job. Now my time is nearly up, so the hoss bein' a real man-killer, I'm obliged to yu.'

The stranger listened gravely, Ginger had not done it well; as he explained afterwards, he had had no time to think out something classy, in consequence of being hungry, but that was his chronic state, so the excuse failed also.

'It certainly is a fool trick to fork a hoss yu are scared of,' Green grinned. Ginger fell into the trap headlong, his face as red as his hair. 'Scared nothin',' he shouted. 'I never seen the thing on four legs or two that I was scared of, an' don't yu forget it.' A burst of laughter from the others apprised him that he had given himself away, and the stranger completed his discomfiture by saying:

'I was thinkin' yu weren't so obliged as yu were tryin' to tell me.'

'Betcha dollar I can name somethin' on two legs that yo're scared of, Ginger,' said Dirty (whose nickname was in reality a compliment, since it was due to his actual fondness for soap and water). The boys argued that anyone so keen on washing must badly need it.

'Take yu,' snapped Ginger unwisely.

'Why, yo're dead easy,' said Dirty, with a broad grin. 'What about Miss Norry?'

'I ain't—' Ginger cut short his protest, for he knew that, uttered, it must be made good. He decided to cut his losses, and flung a dollar at his smirking friend.

'Think yo're blame smart, don't ye?' he said. 'Who got chased outa Kansas City by a girl with a gun?'

Dirty flushed furiously, and then laughed. 'She shore was awful gone on me, that girl was,' he remarked. 'But I didn't go back. No, sir.'

'Gone on yu?' Ginger snorted. 'Gone on yu? She musts bin out of her haid.'

'Ginger don't understand the gentle passion,' Dirty explained commiseratingly to Green. 'He ain't never had a girl run after him!'

The newcomer added his quota to the good-natured wrangle which ensued, but his eyes were busy studying the men with whom he must spend his days and nights. He soon divined that there were two factions in the Y Z outfit, one composed of the younger, light-hearted crew, several of whom he now knew by name, and the others of older men, hard-bitten, stamped with marks of the frontier. From one or two of these he got looks which, if not exactly hostile, were certainly not of welcome, but he did not let this worry him, for he had an abiding confidence in his ability to take care of himself in any company, a confidence born of experience, which is the best kind of that useful commodity.

CHAPTER III

GREEN did not see the foreman at breakfast next morning, and when the meal was over he shouldered his saddle and went to the corral, where the men were getting their mounts and orders for the day's work.

'That's Blaynes,' whispered Larry.

The man indicated was about thirty-five, tall and strongly built, with a lean, dark face upon which was set a perpetual sneer. He moved with the sinuous speed of a snake and carried his head with a forward thrust which gave a reptilian impression. Whoever first bestowed the nickname of 'Rattler' upon him hit the mark to a nicety.

'Dago blood there,' thought Green, 'Treacherous, tough as hickory, and as hard no whip as a mountain lion.'

The foreman looked at him squarely as he walked up, and their eyes clashed like the blades of

duellists. In that instant each instinctively knew the other for an enemy; like love, hate also can be born at first sight. It was the foreman who spoke:

'Green, eh?' he inquired sneeringly.

'That's my name,' replied the other, and the slight emphasis on the last word caused some of the men listening to smile. Blaynes saw the smiles, and they did not improve his temper.

'Dunn what the Old Man's thinkin' of to go a-takin' on any stranger that drifts in,' he growled insolently.

'Mebbe he's thinkin' that he owns the ranch,' countered Green.

This time the hit was direct, and several of the onlookers laughed audibly. Rattler realized that he was getting the worst of the argument, and promptly changed his tactics.

'Yo're quite the funny man, ain't ye?' he jeered. 'Well, we'll see if you can use yore hands as well as yore jaw. Yuan' Durran can double-team it to-day, an' yu will take the roan there.'

He jerked his thumb towards the corral, where the outlaw horse was standing apart from the others, and this time some of the older men grinned; this new chap might be a bit of a

'smarty,' but the foreman knew how to handle him. Green's face was absolutely expressionless as he replied:

'I'll ride my own hoss.'

'You'll do as yo're told while I'm bossin' this outfit, or git,' snarled Blaynes.

'I'll ride my own hoss,' repeated the other, and strode into the corral.

With a quick, low flick of the wrist he roped the roan, and with the help of Larry, got the saddle on and cinched. One lightning spring and he was astride. The other men, fully aware of Blue Devil's capabilities, expected to see him 'piled' instantly, but, to their intense amazement, after a display of mild bucking with which any self-respecting cow-pony resents being ridden, the roan trotted sedately from the corral. Blaynes, who had been waiting for the humiliation and probably injury of the man he already hated, had but one consolation.

'Changed yore mind about obeyin' orders, eh?' he sneered. 'Guessed yu was bluffin'.'

'Guess again,' retorted Green. 'I told yu I'd ride my own hoss, an' that's what I'm doin'.'

He touched the roan's sides with the spurs and shot after Durran, who had already started.

Rattler's gaze followed him in scowling perplexity.

"What th' hell?" he muttered.

He looked up to find Larry endeavoring to conceal his delight at the foreman's discomfiture, and making a poor job of it.

'Why now, Rattler, didn't yu hear about the Old Man givin' him the hoss las' night?' the boy asked.

'No, I didn't; an' I reckon the old fool must 'a bin loco to give a stranger the best hoss on the ranch,' growled the foreman. 'What was the idea?'

Larry, who was enjoying himself hugely, gave a lurid but correct account of how Blue Devil came to change owners, and the foreman's face became more and more venomous as he listened. When the tale was told he turned away without comment, but had Larry been gifted with the faculty of reading expressions he would have realized that he had raised trouble aplenty for his new friend. But as that care-free youngster swung to his saddle his spoken thought was:

'That's one right in the solar perlexus, as the scientific guys puts it.'

Blaynes, who had his own views regarding the Y Z ranch and the pretty girl who would one day own it, strode savagely to the ranch-house, fighting his rage as he would have fought a vicious pony. He met the Old Man coming out.

'Givin' yore hosses away, I hear,' he sneered.

'I gave away a savage brute that near killed my girl, yes,' replied Simon.

'Best bit o' hoss-flesh we got, anyways,' said Blaynes. 'On'y wanted tamin'.'

'Then why didn't ye do it?' retorted the Old Man. 'I offered to give that hoss to anybody that

could ride him months ago. Yu all tried an' got "piled," an' then Norry gets the fool notion she could do it, an' I damn near lose her. What have yu got against the new man, eh?"

'Don't like the looks of him no how,' the foreman said, scowling at the reference to his riding defeat, which rankled none the less because every man of the outfit had shared it.

'I figure he knows his job,' Simon said shortly.

'Mebbe he does,' rejoined Blaynes, who knew just how far he could go with his employer, and had no desire to pass the limit. 'My point is this—we're losin' too many steers to take chances on strangers. How do yu know he ain't in with the rustlers?'

'How do I know that half o' ye ain't in with 'em?' snapped Simon savagely, for the continual loss of his cattle was hitting him sorely. 'Yu don't seem no strike their trail very lively.'

Blaynes ground out an oath. 'Yu ain't no call to say that o' the boys,' he remonstrated. 'We're all a-doin' our best. Them war-paints is hard to canch in this kind o' country.'

'Huh! Yu still reckon it's 'Paches, do yu?' said Simon. 'Well, yo're wrong, Blaynes. Redskins might lift a stray cow or two for the meat, but they wouldn't take 'em by the score. No, sir, it's an organized gang o' rustlers, an' it's up to yu to corral 'em.'

He turned and went indoors, the foreman's eyes following him with a malignant look. This changed magically to a smile as Noreen came out.

'Mornin', Miss Norry. Yo're lookin' fine in spite o' yore shakeup last night,' was his greeting.

'I wasn't hurt—only a wee bit scared,' she admitted.

'Some folks has all the luck. Wish I'd bin there,' said the foreman regretfully, with a look which made the girl turn sharply away. 'What do yu think o' this new guy?'

'Naturally my principal feeling is one of gratitude,' returned the girl. 'He struck me as being capable, and'—she added roguishly—'rather good-looking.'

Blaynes frowned. He had got more than he bargained for. 'Looks ain't much to go on,' he said. 'I've seed cattle-thieves that had him beat a mile thataway, an' as I told the Old Man just now, we can't afford to run risks with strangers when we're losin' steers. He'll do to keep an eye on that feller.'

'I wonder if he's married,' the girl speculated, with a mischievous smile.

'Ugh! Probably got half a dozen wives scattered around the country—that sort usually has,' snorted the foreman.

'He doesn't look like a Mormon; but still, I'll help oy keeping an eye on him, as you suggest, Blaynes,' Noreen laughed as she turned away.

Rattler waited until she was out of earshot and then swore fervently. It was distinctly not his lucky morning.

Green soon ranged alongside Durran, whose eyes opened wide when they saw the horse his companion was riding; he had not witnessed the scene at the corral.

'How come yu on that lump o' deviltry?' he asked.

'Oh, I just climbed up on him,' said Green airily.

'Lots of us has done that, but nary one could stay there,' was the reply. 'Yu must be a medicine-man with hosses.'

'I savvy them,' was Green's answer.

Durran's comment was an inarticulate grunt, and for some miles they loped steadily over the grassy plain without exchanging a word, though the new man did not fail to note the covert, appraising glances of the other.

'Feed a-plenty,' he remarked presently. 'If she's all like this, the Y Z should carry some cattle.'

'She ain't all like this, but there's enough that is,' Durran replied. 'She'd be one big ranch if the owner knew his job.' 'I heard he was a good cattleman,' Green said.

'Yu heard correct—he was a good cattleman; but he started gittin' old quite a piece ago, an'

it's tellin' on him. Why, there's cows bein' stole every week, an' he don't do nothin'. If it wasn't for Rattler, them rustlers would 'a got the whole shootin' match by now.' 'Good man, Rattler, eh?' queried Green.

'Yu said it,' responded Durran, but with no undue enthusiasm in his tone. 'Up to his work. Yes, sir. An' it wouldn't astonish me none to find him ownin' this ranch some day. I've a hunch it'll pay to tie to him.'

They had left the undulating plain and were entering a stretch of rough country which, gashed and scarred, formed the base to a great range of hills, the jagged ridge-line of which showed clear against the sky. The ground in front of them presented a multiplicity of character. Miniature deserts, arid little areas of sand and cactus, interspersed with brush-filled draws, tiny canyons with verdure-clad, overhanging sides, valleys carpeted with lush grass and fed by trickling streams, huge masses of rock, apparently hurled by some mighty hand from the distant range, all jumbled together in inextricable confusion. And behind it all the black belt of pines which clothed the lower slopes of the mountains.

'Best keep yer eyes open, in case we git separated,' warned Durran. 'We call this the Maze, an' it's a damned sight easier to git into than out of, 'specially for a stranger.'

'Reckon yo're right,' Green agreed. 'What do they call the hills over there?'

'Big Chief Range,' replied Durran. 'An' mighty mean country 'cept for redskins an' rustlers.'

They now began to come upon signs of strayed cattle, and were too fully occupied in routing them out of the brush and starting them back to the plain for converse. Green soon discovered that his mount, though obviously new to the work, had the inherited instincts of a cow-pony, and was quick to learn.

'Yu an' me is goin' to get along fine, Blue,' the rider soliloquized after a tussle with a pugnacious steer which had to be roped and thrown before it would listen to reason. This was by no means the only incident of the kind, for the strays were in a half-wild state, and showed a tendency to 'go on the prod' when driven from their retreat.

Presently, riding through a small grassy glade surrounded by cottonwoods, Green pulled up sharply. At his feet lay a dead cow, and a few yards away were the ashes of a tiny fire. His hail brought Durran to the spot.

"Paches," he said at once, pointing to a broken feather, lying as though accidentally dropped, near the carcass. The new hand picked it up and examined it thoughtfully.

'Ain't like Injuns to leave their name and address,' he said slowly. 'Nor meat either.'

'Huh! They was interrupted an' had to make a quick getaway,' suggested Durran.

Green was examining the dead cow. It had been shot in the head, and round the bullet-hole the hair was singed.

'So they fired that shot to advertise their whereabouts,' he said. 'No, that don't explain it.'

'Well, that war-bonnet plume talks plenty loud enough for me,' returned Durran, with a dark look. 'Fac's is fac's.' Green saw that the man's mind was made up, and that argument would be futile, so he dropped the subject. He could not fail to note, however, that Durran's attitude for the rest of the day was a sulky one; apparently he resented the questioning of his judgment, and his conversation was confined to the work in hand.

It was getting towards evening when they returned to the ranch, and they were as hungry as a day in the saddle can make a man. Nevertheless, Green rode past the bunkhouse and up to the owner's dwelling. Old Simon was on the verandah. He listened quietly to the new hand's report, looked at the feather, and Len said:

'Yu got any ideas about it?'

I'm guessin' it ain't 'Paches, but they want us to think it is,' Green replied. 'That feather is plumb clumsy--even a Reservation brave ain't that careless. An' what was the fire for? Injuns don't carry runnin'-irons. 'Sides, the hosses they rode was shod, even the grass trail showed that.'

'Yu didn't follow the tracks?'

'No,' explained Green. 'Durran didn't seem interested, an' I had no orders.'

The old man regarded him steadily for a while, and then said, 'Yo're gettin' 'em now. I want this rustler business cleaned up. That's yore job.'

'Better not advertise it,' suggested Green.

'I ain't a-goin to; I'll explain to Blaynes that yo're on special work for me,' said the rancher.

Green had his own ideas as to the importance Blaynes would attach to his employer's explanation, and he was soon to learn that he was right, for at that moment the foreman came up. There was a note of triumph in his tone as he said:

'Well, Simon, Durran tells me that he come upon some more rustler work, with shore Injun sign; I reckon that settles it.'

'Green's just been tellin' me he come on it,' said Old Simon quietly.

'Well, they was together anyway,' replied Rattler, with a surly glance at the new hand.

'Durran reported to me as foreman, which was the proper thing to do.'

'Green agrees with me that it ain't Injuns,' said the ranch-owner, 'an' I think he's right.'

'So do I,' retorted Blaynes. 'If I'd just been took on, an' wanted to hold my job, I'd agree with the boss every time.'

A sneering smile accompanied the words. Green heard the taunt unmoved, his face like granite. Old Simon laughed. 'Have it yore way, Blaynes. Yu say it's Injuns. All right, fetch in their scalps, an' I'll believe yu. By the way, Green'll be doin' what I say for a bit. Savvy?'

The foreman nodded, and the two men walked towards the bunkhouse. The foreman was the first to break the silence. 'Yu shore are in luck,' he remarked acidly, 'to get a fine hoss an' a soft job all in twenty-four hours.'

'Did the Old Man tell yu it was a soft job?' queried Green sweetly.

'That's what I'd call moseyin' around pertendin' to look for rustlers,' retorted Blaynes.

'So would I,' replied the other. 'But there ain't no rustlers, so it'll be a hard job to find any. Yore way of it the Injuns are stockin' the Reservation with Y Z cows. Why don't yu pay the agent a visit?'

Blaynes made no reply to this pleasantry. Supper was nearly over when they entered the bunkhouse, but with the foreman there, the harassed cook knew better than to make any fuss over producing fresh supplies. Green soon learned that the news of his treatment of Poker Pete had become known, and had been received variously by the men. Some of the younger did not scruple to hide their hearty approbation.

'On'y hope yu ain't scared 'im off the reservation,' was Dirty's comment. 'He owes me money, that hombre.'

'Don't yu worry none,' said one of the older men, whose semi-Indian origin and dark skin had earned for him the name of Nigger. 'If Pete owed a feller anythin', he gets it.'

The speaker directed a malicious glance at Green as he said the words, but the new hand appeared to be entirely occupied with his plate. Nevertheless, he had heard, and sensed that the threat was intended for him.

'Aw, hell! I reckon the old tinhorn will drift,' said another of the younger group, whose name being Simon, found himself promptly re-christened 'Simple,' to distinguish him from the Old Man.

The wrangle went on, and it became more and more evident that the disgraced gambler had friends in the outfit. Green refused to be drawn into the discussion. His meal finished, he rolled a cigarette and slipped outside, after a glance at Larry which was an invitation. Strolling down to the corral, he climbed the rail, and sat there smoking. Presently Barton joined him.

'Well, what do yu think o' the bunch?' he asked, when he had perched himself alongside his friend.

'Yu heard the story o' the curate's egg?' asked Green.

'Shore, yu've said it: good in parts,' replied Larry, with a chuckle. 'So yu've been elecned to collect the rustlers' ha'r, eh?' 'Who told yu?' Green asked quickly.

'Oh, Rattler ain't makin' any secret of it,' was the reply. 'I somehow got the idea he don't like yu.'

'I've a dim suspicion myself thataway,' returned the new hand easily; 'but I don't guess I'll lose any sleep over it.'

'Wish the Old Man would let me trail along with yu,' Larry said wistfully. 'I know the country, an' yu don't; I reckon I'd be useful.'

'Shore yu would, an' if I want any help I'll ask for yu,' Green said. 'In the meantime, keep yore eyes an' ears open; it wouldn't surprise me none if the bunkhouse was a good place to look.'

CHAPTER IV

On the following morning Green saddled the roan and made his way to the spot where he had found the dead cow, intending to take up the trail from there. To his astonishment, he found that the carcass had disappeared, and the original tracks were hopelessly blurred by a number of others leading in all directions.

'They have certainly got quick news of my appointment,' he muttered.

As he sat there surveying the scene in puzzled cogitation, an arrow transfixd his sombrero, snatching it from his head. Instantly he rode straight for the clump of brush from which it seemed to come. He was too late; a crackling in the undergrowth, a shrill whoop, and then the thud of galloping hoofs told him that the hidden assassin had escaped. He returned for his hat and carefully examined the missile.

'Apache, all right, an' a war-shaft at that,' he commented. 'But a brave on his first scout wouldn't have missed such an easy mark at that range. No, gents, I ain't right convinced o' that redskin theory even now.'

Behind the bush from which the arrow had come he found the grass trodden down and several cigarette ends; the bushwhacker had clearly waited some time, and had been careless too. The marks of his flight were apparent, and also told a story.

'No, sir, braves don't wear boots in this neck o' the woods,' the cowboy soliloquized.

Leading his horse, he followed the trail for a few hundred yards; then it ceased, and hoof-prints told that the unknown had there mounted and continued his flight over a stretch of hard, rocky ground, which showed no tell-tale tracks. For an hour Green searched painstakingly, but without success. Then he headed straight across the baffling barrier in the direction of the frowning slopes of the Big Chief Range.

Midday found him traversing some of the wildest country he had ever seen, and he began to realize the magnitude of the task before him. Deep, thickly-wooded valleys, brush-tangled gullies, pine-covered rocky ridges succeeded one another in bewildering confusion, and over all the sullen peaks of the Big Chief towered in solemn majesty.

'It's a man's job, all right,' he said. 'I reckon yu could lose an army here, an' not be too awful careless at that.' He plodded on for another hour, and presently emerged on the bank of a little stream beside which stood a rude log shack with a sodded roof from which a trickle of smoke ascended. He had come upon the place so unexpectedly that he could not hope to have escaped observation, so he adopted a bold policy and rode up to the door.

'Hello, the house!' he called.

A man instantly appeared in the doorway, rifle in hand. He was a tough-looking customer, with black beady eyes which scanned the visitor with suspicious care.

'Howdy,' he said, and waited.

'I'm from the Y Z,' Green said, knowing that the brand on his mount had told this already.

'I got eyes,' came the retort. 'New hand, I s'pose. Ain't yu strayed off yore range quite a piece?'

'Oh, I reckon I'm lost all right,' laughed Green.

'Light an' eat,' said the other.

The interior of the cabin was as primitive as the outside. A rude, home-made table, two or three stools, and a pallet bed comprised the furniture. A pick, shovel and a gold-digger's pan stood in one corner.

Washin', eh?' Green asked, with a glance at the implements. 'Gettin' much?'

'Well, it ain't nothin' to advertise,' the man replied, 'but it pays better'n punchin' cows.'

'It don't have to be a bonanza to do that,' laughed the cowboy. 'Don't see much company, I reckon.'

'Yo're the first in two weeks,' was the answer.

The meal dispatched, the two men smoked in silence for a while. Then Green remarked casually:

'Redskins bother yu any?'

The man's eyes narrowed for a moment, and there was the barest hesitation before he said, 'Naw, I treat 'em right an' mind my own business. Don't see much of 'em: two or three braves now an' then—aimin' to borry a few o' yore steers, I guess; but that's yore lookout.'

'That's so,' agreed Green, joining in the laugh that followed. 'Means a job for chaps like me, eh?'

'Shore; puttin' it thataway, the Injun's some good, which I never did expect to think,' grinned the other.

'Preachers say everythin' was made for a purpose, even rattlesnakes, but I'm blamed if I can find any use for them,' Green remarked, and then added casually, 'I'm told there's another ranch up here somewhere, the Double X.'

A look of alertness illumined the not-too-clean features of his host for a brief moment, and then he said slowly: 'I've heard of it, but I ain't been there; it's way back in the hills, an' I ain't nohow interested in cattle at present.'

The conversation languished, and after a while the visitor rose and said, 'Well, I got to be driftin'. Which way do I go for the Y Z?'

'Cross the stream and head due south—there ain't no depth o' water just now. Less'n half an hour yu'll strike the trail to Hatchett's.'

With a word of thanks, Green mounted his animal and forded the creek. As he vanished among the trees he looked round, saw the miner watching him, and waved his hand.

'An' that ain't a good-bye, old-timer,' he muttered. 'Yu an' me is goin' to meet again, or I miss my guess. That minin' outfit was considerable rusty for recent use, an' I'm bettin' high yu couldn't produce an ounce o' dust nohow.' He found the trail, and giving Blue the rein, headed for the ranch. It proved a longish ride, and darkness was coming on when he unsaddled, turned the horse into the corral, and made his way to the bunkhouse. The men were at supper, and Green caught what he was looking for an expression of surprise on the faces of the foreman, Durran, and several of the older men.

'Hello, Green!' greeted Larry. 'Rattler was sayin' yu was shore lost, or Blue had "piled" yu, or 'I'd been snatched to glory by a blue-eyed angel with white wings,' suggested the late-comer with a smile. 'Well, as a matter o' fact, I did get lost; this is shore a discouragin' country for strangers.'

'Them as don't mind their own business are liable to find it so,' put in Blaynes. 'Get any rustlers?'

Green laughed easily. 'Nary one; those interestin' animiles seem to be amazin' shy in these parts. I found a miner, though.'

A look of quick suspicion came into the foreman's eyes, and then he said carelessly: 'Old Nugget, I s'pose. He's loco. Hope yu searched him to see if he'd got any steers hidden in his clothes.'

The men laughed gaily at the joke, and Green joined in; he did not want any open breach with Blaynes. Later, he got a chance to question Larry about the prospector.

'Oh, he's a harmless old piker,' replied the cowboy, with a touch of contempt in his tone.

'Been pannin' the streams around here for years, an' if he gets "color" now an' then, he's happy. Never seen him at the ranch; but he goes into town for supplies. An' now I come to think of it, I've seen him powwowin' with Poker Pete, but we've all done that.' Green considered for a moment and, having determined that Larry was to be trusted, told the story of the missing cow and the ambush. The boy's eyes widened as he listened.

'Don't that beat hell?' was his astonished comment. 'An' smart too. Say, this ain't no one man job. Why not tell Old Simon, an' ask for me as a side-partner?'

Green shook his head. 'I'm layin' low for a bit. Yu keep all I've told yu behind yore face,' he said. 'I'm relyin' on yu now; but we got work both ends. 'Nother thing. Don't let on that we're too friendly; we don't want 'em to get suspicious o' yu.'

'Rattler don't love me none as it is,' Larry said. 'I'd have asked for my time months ago but for...'

'Shore; but don't tell me—I might be surprised,' interrupted his friend, with a grin. 'Well, don't yu care. A fellow can't tell what's in the pack till the cards is turned.'

'Some fellers can't; yu seem to be able to,' Larry retorted.

'Easy enough with tin horns like Poker Pete, but when Mother Fate is a-dealin' it's a hoss of a different color. Know anythin' about Old Simon?'

'Mighty little,' was the reply. 'He settled here with his girl soon after the gold-diggin's petered out, but I never heard where he come from. That must be about eighteen years ago.'

'His daughter don't favor him much,' Green said reflectively.

'Much?' cried Larry indignantly. 'She ain't a mite like him. How could she be? Old Simon never fell out of a picture-book.' Green shook with silent mirth. 'Yu certainly are easy,' he chuckled. 'The little feller with the bow an' arrows has got yu thrown an' tied shore enough.'

'An' another feller with a bow an' arrow'll lay yu out cold an' stiff if yu ain't careful,' retorted the boy, whose red face showed that the blow had gone home. 'Joking on one side, Green, I wouldn't care to be in yore shoes.'

'Takes a man to fill 'em,' bantered the other.

'A good part o' one, anyway,' Larry flashed back. Whereupon they agreed to call it quits and sought their beds, entering the bunkhouse separately.

Lying in his bunk, Green turned over the events of the day in an endeavor to find a key to the mystery which overhung the ranch. He was convinced that the foreman was playing a deep game, but he had no proof, and he recognized that obtaining it would be no picnic. Not that this troubled him; he had been in tight places before—in fact, his life for years had been, as he humorously phrased it, 'one damn squeeze after another.'

'If old Nugget is in this, he'll want to report my visit,' he ruminated. 'I'll be around there early to-morrow,' and having thus settled the next step to be taken, he turned over and promptly fell asleep.

At daybreak he rose and dressed without awaking any of the others. He aroused the cook, who slept in his own quarters, and representing that he had an urgent job for the ranch-owner, managed to secure a meal and provision for the day, though not without protest.

'If all yu dudes is goin' to eat separate, I quit,' growled the cook. 'What's the matter with this blamed ranch, anyway? There's Rattler comes pesterin' round for his breakfast 'alf an 'our ago, an' now yu. Must be afeared yu ain't earnin' yore pay, some o' yu.'

This was news for Green; the foreman had got ahead of him. A query to the cook as to Rattler's destination elicited a disgusted reply.

"Ow in 'ell do I know? Does he strike yu as a feller who advertises? Yu ain't told me nothin' yerself."

'I don't advertise either,' Green laughed, and left the irate provision purveyor muttering dark and bloody threats against the next unlucky wight who should come in search of an early meal.

Surmising that the foreman might be on the same errand as himself, Green proceeded on his way cautiously, taking cover when it offered, and avoiding the skyline whenever it was possible to do so. He discovered no sign of Blaynes, however, until he reached the hut, and there, from the thick brush, he saw a horse with the reins thrown waiting patiently outside the door. Leaving his own mount, he crept close enough to make out the Y Z brand on the animal's rump.

Making a detour, he found a fallen tree which bridged the stream at a narrow point, and crossed. There were no windows at the back of the cabin, and stepping with the craft of an Indian, Green was soon crouched by the logs which formed the rear wall. Inside, he could hear voices, the foreman's and the old miner's.

'Now yu understan', Nugget,' Blaynes was saying. 'He ain't wanted, an' if yu catch him nosin' round here, bump him off. There won't be no inquiries, an' if there is, it'll be put down to Injuns, if yo're careful.'

The other man laughed shortly, and guessing that the visitor was about to leave, Green retreated to the bushes. In a few moments Rattler appeared, mounted, and rode off in the direction of the ranch. Green waited patiently, and at the end of about half an hour, Nugget came out carrying a saddle and lariat. In a little clearing not far from the cabin was a rough corral. Nugget roped the sole occupant, a savage-looking cowpony, adjusted the saddle, and took a dim trail which appeared to lead to the mountains.

'Bet m'self two dollars he's headed for the Double X,' Green soliloquized. 'I'll have to see if I win.'

Keeping well in the background, he followed the tracks of the man in front. The trail, which was obviously very little used, wound in and out among the trees and undergrowth, which here and there almost obstructed it. Nugget was evidently taking his time over the trip, and once the pursuer was near enough to get a whiff of rank tobacco. He at once slowed down. He had no fear of losing his man, for the ground was soft, and the hoof-marks of the pony showed clearly. For over an hour he jogged steadily on, and then found himself on the rim of a deep valley, treeless and covered with lush grass. Halfway down the long slope he could see his quarry trotting leisurely towards the other side. He waited until Nugget vanished over the

far skyline, and then followed at a fast lope.

As he expected, the miner had disappeared, but his trail led down a long incline covered with pine and clumps of undergrowth. Green pressed on, anxious to make up the time he had been forced to waste at the valley. Rounding a tree-covered pinnacle of rock, he suddenly pulled his horse back on its haunches. In front of him, running at right angles, lay a broad open trail, scored with innumerable footprints of horse and cattle. Those of the rider in front could no longer be distinguished. Green swore softly.

'Hell!' he said. 'Gotta take a chance now, Blue. But what's a big trail like this a-doin' here?' The animal's answer was a movement to the left, and his master, who had the superstitions as well as the instincts of a gambler, accepted the hint. Mile after mile they followed the trail, which twisted and turned round hills and gullies in a way that showed foresight on the part of those who had first used it.

'Feller could take a tidy bunch o' cows over this, an' at a good lick,' muttered the cowpuncher. An hour's hard riding brought him no sight of the man he was tracking. The cattle-trail, moreover, came to an end on the bank of a wide but shallow stream which emerged from the jaws of a dark and narrow canyon. Into this for some distance the trailer penetrated, scanning the banks of the stream carefully, but no trace of horse or cow rewarded him. On either hand the living rock, sparsely clothed with vegetation, rose almost vertically, while straight ahead a blank wall of rock indicated that the canyon was a blind one.

'An' cows ain't got wings,' Green said, adding to his unspoken thought.

He turned back to where the trail ended, crossed the water, and struck out over an expanse of shale-covered ground. It proved to be more than a mile wide, and on the other side of it, he found cattle sign again.

He pressed on, passing now through deep forest, then a stretch of open grassland, while at times the trail dipped into deep, savage gullies, hewn by Nature out of the bare rock and draped with spare vegetation. Emerging from one of these, he saw a bit of rolling prairie, shut in by wooded hills, and on the edge of it some log-buildings and corrals. In the distance were specks which he knew to be cattle.

The place appeared to be deserted, and he was about to shout when a man showed in the doorway. Green noted that he did not seem surprised, and surmised that his approach had been observed. The fellow was powerful-looking, thick-lipped, and wore a black patch over one eye, which imparted a cunning expression to his face. He had a revolver slung at his hip, and the handle of a knife protruded from his boot.

'Afternoon,' Green greeted pleasantly. 'I take it this is the Double X.'

'It is,' said the other shortly. 'An' I take it you're the new Y Z feller who got gay with Poker Pete in Hatchett's.'

Green nodded, smiling. 'I don't allow tin horns to run blazers on me,' he returned easily. 'Odd how news travels, even out here.'

'I was in town yesterday,' the man explained quickly, and Green chuckled inwardly. 'What's brung yu out this far?'

'Well, I've been huntin' strays, an' got the fool notion I was headin' for home, but I reckon I've strayed some m'self,' the cowpuncher explained.

The one-eyed man burst into a coarse laugh. 'If yu keep agoin' yu'll have to go all round the world to get to the Y Z,' he guffawed.

'Is that so? Pointin' right away from it, eh?' replied the visitor. 'Well, if this ain't the beatenest country; that's twice I done lost m'self in it.'

If the man doubted this somewhat unlikely excuse for the puncher's presence he showed no sign of it. 'Get down an'drink,' he invited. 'Can't offer yu any grub: we're clean out. The boys are at Hatchett's with the wa.ggin, fetchin' in what I ordered yesterday.'

His one eye watched the visitor closely as he offered this information. Green nodded understandingly, dismounted, and tied his horse, not yet being certain that Blue would stand for a thrown rein. His host eyed the animal covetously.

'Good hoss,' he remarked. 'Had him long?'

'No,' replied the cowboy. 'He's kind o' new.'

The room they entered was a large one, and had a boarded floor. The furniture consisted mainly of a long table and a number of chairs and benches, mostly decorated with saddles, guns, and odds and ends of camp equipment. Two doors on the far side apparently led to the other parts of the building, which was of one storey only. Through one of these doors Green could hear a peculiarly raucous voice bellowing a cowboy ballad.

'That's my cook—thinks he's a blasted opery singer,' explained the host. 'I'll just abate him a bit.' He opened one of the doors and yelled 'Hey, Carewso, stop that blamed racket; I got a visitor what's fond o' music.'

The unholy noise died away into a grumble, and the host shut the door with a grin. 'The boys call him that. They stand it pretty well, but I reckon they'll abolish him one of these days.'

He produced a bottle and glasses, pouring out generous portions. 'Here's how,' he said. 'My name's Dexter, an' I own this place.'

Green gave his own name, and then added: 'Nice location yu got here, but the country round strikes me as bein' a hard one for cows.'

'Yu said it,' was the reply. 'We lose a good few.'

'Rustlers?' queried Green.

The other man spat out an expletive. 'Yep, copper-coloured ones from the Reservation just across the range. The damn thieves know all the passes, an' they sneak through, make their gather, an' git back without leavin' a sign yu can swear to.'

'They'd shore be hard to trail about here,' Green said.

'Hard to trail?' cried his host. 'I believe yu. Why, the way they vanish sometimes yu'd think the beggers had wings; an' that's somethin' no Injun'll ever wear, in this world or the next. I've give up; but any war-plume what comes prancin' round here is apt to die o' lead-poisonin' mighty sudden.'

'I never had no use for Injuns,' Green agreed.

He declined a second drink on the ground that he must get back to the Y Z before dark, and asked the nearest way. He was not surprised when Dexter advised an entirely different route from the one which had brought him there.

'Straight across the valley an' through that notch in the rim'll bring yu to a plain trail to Hatchett's. If yu meet my boys tell 'em I'm a-gettin' hungrier every minit. So long! Drop in any time yo're passin'.'

The visitor returned the salutation and, mounting his horse, rode across the valley as directed. The non-appearance of the miner puzzled him, though he inclined to the belief that Nugget was there, keeping out of sight. The owner of the Double X had not impressed him favourably, but he had discovered nothing to connect him with the rustlers except the repetition of the redskin theory, and it was conceivable that the man might be losing stock and blaming the Indians for it.

In crossing the valley he purposely passed near one of the groups of feeding cattle. He did not slow up, for that would have aroused suspicion, but he got close enough to get a good look at the brand, a crude double X, roughly done, but apparently honest enough. Nevertheless, it provided him with food for thought. He reached the notch in the rim, climbed up a narrow stony pathway out of the valley, and found, as his host had promised, a plain trail. He had covered some miles of this when he heard singing, and presently round a bend came a lumbering wagon, with one man driving and three others riding beside it. The driver pulled up with an oath when he saw the puncher, and the right hands of the riders slid to their holsters.

'All right, boys,' Green called out genially. 'I've just been visitin' yore boss, an' he said that if I met up with yu, I was to say that he's a-gettin' hungrier every minit, an' he shore enough looked it.'

One of the men laughed, and the attitude of guarded hostility relaxed somewhat. None of the four was young, and all had the look of men toughened by experience—good or bad. A nasty crowd to tangle up with, the cowpuncher decided.

'Dex may reckon hisself lucky to see us to-night,' commented one. 'If Pete had been in town it would've bin to-morrow mawnin'.'

Green guessed that they knew who he was, and that the reference to the gambler had been made purposely, but he decided to ignore it.

'Well,' he drawled. 'I gotta be pushin' along if I want any supper myself; that Y Z gang is real destructive at mealtimes.'

His refusal to take up the challenge, for so they regarded it, created a bad impression, and the laugh which greeted his remark was frankly sneering. With a curt 'S'long' they rode on, grinning at one another. Green also resumed his journey, and he too was smiling.

'They're thinkin' that little ruckus at the Folly was just a grand-stand play, an' that I'm shy the sand to back it up, which is just what I want 'em to think,' he soliloquised.

All the same, he had to confess that it had been an entirely disappointing day.

CHAPTER V

A Week passed without any further development to disturb the ordinary routine of the ranch. Green steadily raked the surrounding country, but gained nothing but a knowledge of it, and the covert sneers of the foreman and the older hands. In some way, the impression created by his rough handling of Poker Pete had worn off, and sometimes the insults were so thinly veiled that the object of them had hard work to restrain himself. Larry, his staunch admirer, could not understand it.

'Don't yu see,' Green said, when the boy spoke of it. 'I'd be playin' their game? I'm not ready for a showdown yet.'

Another dissatisfied occupant of the ranch was Noreen. Accustomed to the unqualified devotion of all the men she met, she found the aloofness of the newcomer a little disturbing, the more so that she was unable—though she would not admit it—to adopt the same attitude. In her presence he was polite, but quiet, almost stern, whereas she knew that with Larry, and some of the others, he could behave like a boy.

Girl-like, she invested him with mystery, and wove romance of a broken heart and blighted life round him. Once or twice she had deliberately given him opportunities to speak about himself, but he had—always evaded them. Larry, whom she cautiously pumped one day, could tell her nothing.

'I reckon he's had trouble,' the boy said. 'Mebbe there's a sheriff a-lookin' for him, but if I

was that sheriff I'd take mighty good care not to find him; he's hell on wheels when he gets goin'.'

But to the men he was not eulogistic, even going to the length of expressing the opinion that the newcomer's treatment of the gambler might have been a flash in the pan. More than once he was questioned, for there was a good deal of curiosity in the outfit as to the stranger's ability to take care of himself. He wore two guns, but no one had yet seen him use one. It was Larry who discovered that schemes were being hatched to 'try-out' the new hand. The latter laughed grimly when the boy warned him.

'They're goin' to sic "Snap" Lunt on yu,' Larry said. 'He's a killer, an' a shore wizard with a six-gun.'

Lunt had recently come back to the ranch, having been riding the line at the time of Green's appearance on the scene. He was a small man, with a twisted, wizened face like dried hide, a square, powerful body, and short legs bowed by years spent in the saddle. His one pride was in his ability to use a Colt, in which accomplishment he acknowledged only one superior. This admission, which was news to the others, was made at supper one evening when the talk had persistently veered to guns and gunmen.

'Who was that, Snap?' asked Simple.

The feller they call "Sudden," replied the gunman. 'No, I never had a run in with him, or likely I wouldn't be here, but I saw him in action once, years ago when he warn't more than a kid. Neatest thing I ever see, an' it happened in Deadwater, which ain't a town no more. Sudden was in a saloon when the barkeeper, who was a good sort, gives him the word that three fellers, all known killers, is layin' for him.

' "There's a back door here," he sez. "Pull yore freight. Three to one is above the odds, an' nobody'll hold it against yu." ' "Yu bet they won't, but I'm thankin' yu all the same," sez Sudden, an' steps out into the street as unconcerned as the corpse at a buryin'.

'Them three buzzards is waitin' about twenty paces away, two of 'em on the opposite side o' the street, an' the other slinkin' up the same side as the saloon, an' their guns is out. But he beat 'em to it even then. Before they could git a shot out, the fellers across the street is tumblin' in the dust. The other chap fired one shot which might've hit a star mebbe, an' ran for his life. He looked round once, saw the boy's gun on him, an' tried to turn a corner that warn't there. His face was a sight; it looked like a herd o' cattle had stampeded across it, but, all the same, he was lucky; the other two had to be planted.'

'But don't yu reckon yo're faster now than yu were then, Snap?' asked Nigger.

'I know I am; but don't yu reckon he's improved too?' retorted the gunman. 'Even if he ain't he's better'n me. I never saw a movement, an' them fellers were drilled plumb centre between the eyes.'

Sudden, the outlaw! Not a man there but had heard of him, and of his uncanny dexterity with weapons, and the ease with which he had so far eluded capture. The tale of his exploits grew as first one and then another related stories he had heard. Snap Lunt listened with an expression of tolerant contempt.

'An' more than half o' them I'll bet my hoss he never done,' he said presently. 'When a feller gets a name, every killin', hold- up, or cattle-stealin' that can't be traced to anybody else gets his brand put on it.' There was a tinge of bitterness in his voice, and this deepened as he resumed. 'A feller sometimes gets drove into the wrong road. Once it gets known that he's swift with a gun there always happens along a damn fool who thinks he can make a reputation by showin' he's a bit swifter. An' he ain't, so he gets wiped out, an' soon there's another damn fool—the world's full of 'em. By all accounts, Sudden fights fair, an' that's more than some did that went up against him.'

The others were silent for a moment; this was a new side to the man they had always

regarded as a ruthless slayer of his fellows—one who took a delight in putting his art to its deadliest use. They sensed that he was telling his own story. It was Rattler who broke the spell; matters were not going as he wished.

'Well, Sudden may be all yu say, Snap; but some fellers sport two guns an' are afeared to use one.'

'Meanin'?' Lunt said quietly.

'Oh, I ain't referrin' to yu, Snap,' replied the foreman quickly. 'We all know yo're game; yu have the right to wear a couple o' guns.'

'So has any other feller who cares to tote the weight,' came the reply. 'Yu can rope yore own hoss, Rattler.'

Some of the men who knew what was toward looked at Lunt in surprise. Green watched the scene with a glint of a smile on his lips. He was well aware that the foreman was trying to engineer a quarrel between himself and Lunt, and that the latter had now definitely declined to be made use of. He began to have a feeling of respect for the little gunman.

The foreman glared; he had been plainly told to do his own dirty work, and though not lacking in animal courage, the task did not appeal to him. He was considered good with a forty-five himself, but the other man was an unknown quantity, and he could not understand why Lunt had 'ducked.' It was Green himself who came to his rescue.

'There won't be any shootin', Blaynes,' he said, and there was an acid touch to his voice.

'When there's any necessity, I can use my guns well enough. If yu don't choose to believe that, well'—he leaned forward, his hands hanging loosely at his sides, his eyes narrowed and alert—'pull yore own.'

For a moment there was tense silence. Blaynes, challenged in his turn, was obviously undecided. His right hand moved a fraction towards his holster, and then—he rasped out a laugh.

'Yu shore are a touchy feller, Green—can't stand a bit o' joshin',' he said. 'Roundin' up rustlers 'pears to have got yu all jumpy.'

Green laughed too, and it was an unpleasant one for the foreman to swallow, but the conversation became general again, and the incident ended. Later on, Blaynes had a word with Lunt.

'Never knew yu to duck before, Snap,' he said. 'What got into yu?'

'Duck nothin',' came the retort. 'I ain't got no quarrel with the feller. Why didn't yu pull on him?'

'I'm foreman, an' I got my reasons,' Blaynes said sulkily. 'Huh! Self-preservation don't happen to be one o' them, does it?' asked the other sarcastically.

The foreman ground out an oath. 'I wait my time,' he said. 'Sorry to find I can't depend on yu, that's all.'

'Yu can depend on me to do my work, but dry-nursin' yu ain't part of it,' the little gunman said bluntly, and walked away.

As he approached the bunkhouse, he met Green and Larry coming away, and stopped for a moment to say, 'Green, however slick a man may be with a gun, he can be got—from behind.'

'Now what the blazes does he mean by that?' asked Larry, as the gunman, without waiting for a reply, went into the bunkhouse.

'He means a whole lot, I reckon,' answered his friend. 'I fancy that's not such a bad hombre,

Larry.'

'Well, he told Rattler straight out in meetin', anyways,' Larry said. 'It's a point to remember.' 'Shore is. Yu got anythin' to tell me?'

'Not a durn thing,' was the disgusted rejoinder. 'On'y that yu can count on Dirty, Ginger, an' Simple to back my play, whatever it is.'

'Well, that's somethin', anyhow. Trouble is, we ain't got no play to make yet. How long ago was the Double X started?' 'Two-three years, I guess. Dex ain't got much of a herd.' 'What's the size of his outfit?'

'Seven or eight, including the cook.'

'All of them men to handle a small herd, huh?'

'Well, now yu mention it, they shore didn't oughtta be overworked—never struck me that way before. Yu got anythin' else against 'em?'

Green shook his head. 'We gotta wait, boy,' he said. 'How's the Pretty Lady been treatin' yu lately?'

This was his name for Noreen, and it never failed to produce an embarrassed flush on the face of her young admirer. Larry countered quickly.

'I'm beginnin' to think she's more interested in a handsome mysterious stranger,' he retorted.

'She was shore askin' me a lot o' questions.'

'An' yu told her?'

'All I knew.'

His friend grinned. 'That musta taken yu quite a while,' he commented, with gentle sarcasm.

'Shore did,' said Larry. 'I explained how yore wife had left yu, takin' the kids, owin' to yu treatin' her so badly, drinkin' an' hellin' round generally, an' that two sheriffs were anxious to meet yu on account of a bank robbery, to say nothin' of the feller whose brother yu shot from behind—Hi ! leggo my ear, yu two-gun mockery : it's long enough as it is.'

'It certainly is, an' the other's a match for it,' agreed the libelled one. 'Get down on yore hunkers in the long grass an' no one could tell yu from a jack-rabbit. Yu'd be a lovely liar, Larry —on'y yu ain't always lovely.'

Larry caressed the injured member, feeling to discover if it really had started to come out by the roots.

'I wish I'd told her yu were a cannibal an' a hoss-thief,' he said regretfully. 'When're yu goin' to come alive an' catch the rustlers, huh?'

'Well, I got 'em scared, ain't I?' expostulated Green. 'They ain't done nothin' for a week.'

Early on the following morning the inmates of the bunkhouse were aroused by a shout, and tumbling out half-dressed, they saw Durran drop wearily from a staggering pony. He had come in from the furthestmost of the cabins used by the line-riders on the frontiers of the ranch. Rattler pushed to the front.

'What's up, Durran?' he asked.

'Rustlers, an' hell to pay,' was the gasped answer. 'Few hours after dark las' night, 'bout seven or eight of 'em rushed me an' Bud, firm' as they come. They got Bud, shot my hoss, an' helped theirselves. Think. I perforated one, but I was afoot. Took me near an hour to catch Bud's pony, an' I been ridin' since.'

'Couldn't see who they were, I s'pose,' said the foreman.

'Blasted war-paints, every mother's son,' replied Durran emphatically, and Blaynes turned a triumphant eye on Green. A chorus of forceful curses greeted the news.

No more time was wasted. Breakfast was despatched in gulps, and in less than half an hour a dozen men, well-mounted and armed, were galloping at breakneck speed for the scene of the outrage. Green and Larry were of the number, and remembering the conversation of the previous night, the boy could not resist the opportunity.

'Yeah, yu got 'em scared, shore enough,' he murmured.

'Shut yore face, yu—yu jackass!' admonished his friend. 'I've been expectin' this. Would yu have said that Bud and the foreman was bosom pals, so to speak?'

Barton shook his head. 'No, nothin' like that, though I don't know of any trouble between 'em. Ginger was Bud's bunkie; look at him.'

The red-headed puncher was riding only a few yards from them, his young tanned face like stone, his jaws clamped and his eyes blazing. Suddenly he spoke :

'By God! if they've rubbed out Bud, I'll have a scalp for every one of his fingers if I have to go to the Reservation to get 'em.'

The savage threat of vengeance was shouted, as though the speaker had to give vent to his pent-up emotion. Several of the younger men gave grunts of approval, but only the foreman spoke, after a curious look at Ginger which Green did not fail to notice.

'Aw, save yore breath, Ginger,' Blaynes said. 'Yu'll want it all before we're through; mebbe he ain't plugged bad.'

The wild burst of speed with which the party had started now slackened, and the riders pulled their mounts down to a steady lope which ate up the miles without unduly tiring the animals. The trail wound about, avoiding the rough country, and keeping to the open prairie where the going was good. Now and then they passed herds of feeding cattle. This was a part of the range Green had not yet explored. It was, he noticed, much nearer to the Big Chief mountains, and the grazing land was shut in by country of the wildest nature.

'When the cattle first began to vanish, Old Simon reckoned they just naturally strayed an' lost themselves,' Larry said. 'So they built the cabins, and started line-ridin', but it ain't stopped the leak.'

Green was watching Durran, who, despite his exhaustion, had insisted on accompanying the party. He was now riding beside the foreman, and the pair were deep in conversation. Green frankly confessed himself puzzled. If these men were acting a part, they were doing it well. The unexpected incident was the slaying of Bud, for he felt sure that the puncher was dead. Utterly unnecessary, he could not believe that it was originally intended. Was it an accident, or did it become necessary? For the remainder of the long ride his companion got little out of him, and after one or two attempts at conversation, the boy gave up and rode in silence until they sighted their destination.

There's the cabin!" Larry cried.

It was small, but strongly-built of untrimmed logs chinked with clay, and looked peaceful enough in the bright sunshine. But tragedy was there. It was Ginger who, spurring ahead, first saw the body of his friend. Flinging himself from his horse, he snatched off his hat and stood looking down at the form outstretched on the grass but a bare fifty yards from the hut. One glance told him the worst.

One by one the men dismounted and bareheaded, grouped themselves around their fallen comrade. The foreman knelt to examine the body. A bullet had grazed the temple, and there was an ominous stain high in the chest. Rattler, who had not touched the dead man, stood up. 'He's cashed,' he said. 'They got him twice. Two of yu carry him to the cabin; we'll send the wagon when we get back. Scatter now an' pick up the trail.'

Green interposed. 'One minit, boys.' He stooped and gently opened the dead man's shirt at the

neck, disclosing a gaping wound just below the collar-bone. 'That crease on the head ain't nothin', though it likely fetched him off his hoss,' he continued. 'This is what killed him, an' that's knife-work.'

He picked up Bud's revolver, which was lying near the body. No shots had been fired from it. The spot showed signs of a struggle: the grass was trampled, and there were deep marks of the cowboy's high heels, as though he had made desperate efforts to stand on his feet.

'What's it matter how it happened, anyway?' said the foreman contemptuously. 'He's passed out, an' we gotta get on the track o' them that did it.'

Green did not reply, but remained looking at the spot after the poor clay had been taken to the hut and the others were searching for the raiders' trail. Suddenly a bright glint in the grass caught his eye; he stooped and slipped something into a pocket.

He walked over to the cabin. It consisted of one room only, furnished with two bunks, a table, a couple of chairs, and a stove. On a shelf were supplies of ammunition, tobacco, and food. These appeared to be untouched. The body had been deposited in one of the bunks, and Ginger was covering it with a blanket. His grief-stricken face was grim and hard: death he had seen before, but this time the fell Monarch had touched him nearly. Green put a hand on his shoulder.

'Ginger,' he said, 'don't be in too big a hurry to start for the Reservation.'

The cowboy whirled, his narrowed, filmed eyes boring into the other. 'Green,' he said hoarsely, 'if you know anythin'—'

'I don't, but I got an idea,' was the quiet reply. 'When I find out, I'll turn him over to yu, whoever he may be. That's a promise.'

Ginger held out his hand and they gripped. Then, turning to the blanketed form, he muttered thickly, 'I'll get him for yu, Buddy, don't yu worry,' and strode away.

Green followed, mounted his horse, and joined the others.

The trail of the riders had soon been found, and also the 'spot where, behind a clump of cottonwoods near the cabin, they had waited in ambush for the approach of the two cowboys. Beyond the fact that the horses were all shod, the ground told them nothing, and Blaynes wasted little time over it.

'Come on, boys, let's get after the damn thieves,' he cried, and spurred his mount into the broad trail left by the stolen beasts. 'Pretty good gather,' muttered Larry, scanning the hoofprints over which they were galloping. 'Three to four score, I reckon.' 'Over four,' replied Green. 'They pushed 'em hard too.'

This was evident from the depth of the indentations, but the pace must have decreased as the trail plunged deeper into the broken country. At the end of an hour the pursuers found themselves threading a labyrinth of gullies, brush-covered slopes, and thickets of cottonwood and spruce. The speed was not great, but they had the satisfaction of knowing that they must be travelling very much faster than the herd. Then came the danger signal: fitful puffs of wind, growing stronger and more frequent, told them what to expect. The sky grew black and the air cold.

'Damned storm a-comin', boys,' Rattler growled. 'Reckon we'd better hole up here.'

Hurriedly the men dismounted, donned their slickers, hobbled and tied the horses, turning them with their rumps to the wind, and sought shelter for themselves. Huddled close against rock or tree-stump, they awaited the misery they could not escape. Another moment and the storm was upon them; a terrific wind snatched at their garments, and drove millions of

stinging grains of sand upon and through them. Muffled up as they were, the devilish particles penetrated, and the horses squealed, while the men swore under the torture of thousands of pricking needles. For nearly an hour they endured the agony of hell itself, and then the storm passed; the maddening patter of sand on saddle and slicker ceased, and the men arose and sought avidly for their canteens.

'She was shore a fierce little blow,' remarked Dirty, his throat having become usable again. 'Wonder where she picked up the sand?'

'Huh ! Not much doubt about that,' growled the foreman. 'She's come right across Sandy Parlour, an' if this trail leads to it—an' I'm bettin' it does—every blasted track'll be wiped out.' Half an hour's riding proved that Blaynes had surmised correctly. The cattle-tracks ended on the edge of a broad stretch of desert, the face of which had been swept smooth by the storm. The foreman shrugged his shoulders in disgust.

'Don't it beat all, the luck they has?' he asked. 'Well, boys, it ain't no use agoin' on. To search Sandy Parlour without a trail'd be wuss than lookin' for a nigger on a pitch-black night, an' we don't know where they're a-comin' out.'

The men looked at one another; it was evident that some of the younger men did not like the idea of giving up the pursuit, but the foreman's contention was sound. Green alone spoke:

'See here, Blaynes : I admit it looks a pretty hopeless proposition, but why not let me an' one o' the boys snoop around for awhile an' see if we can pick up a trail?'

The foremen grinned unpleasantly as he replied, 'Well, it's yore job, ain't it? What's the idea o' yu wanting help? Ain't gettin' modest, are yu?'

Green chose to ignore the sneer. The idea is that if we do hit on the trail, I can send for yu an' the boys while I foller it up,' he said quietly. 'I'll take Barton—he's got a fast hoss.'

Blaynes nodded sulkily. Two fellers wastin' time 'stead o' one, an' we're short-handed,' he growled.

He made no further protest, however, and in a few moments Green and Larry were alone. Perhaps of all the posse, Ginger alone envied them their task. His parting words were, 'Yu find that trail, boys, an' we'll come a-bilin'.'

'Good Injun trick, crossing the Sandy,' remarked Larry. 'Good Injun nothin',' retorted his companion. 'Yu ain't swallowin' that redskin rubbish, are yu?'

'But Durran said

'An' Durran's christian names are George Washington, ain't they? An' he looks a truthful man. Come awake, feller, an' ask yoreself if Injuns are likely to leave a couple o' rifles, an' all the ammunition an' stores in the hut when they'd all the time there is to take 'em away?'

Larry looked thoughtful. 'It certainly don't seem to fit in,' he admitted.

'An' here's somethin' else that don't fit in,' Green went on, fishing out the object he had picked up near the body. What the blazes is that?' queried Larry.

'She's a pocket machine for making smokes—I seen 'em when I was East a while ago. Here is how she works.'

He got out his makings and in a few moments produced a cigarette, while Larry looked on in undisguised amazement. 'Didn't belong to Bud, I reckon?' Green asked.

'No, Bud rolled his own pills,' Larry said, and then, 'Ain't it the lady's pet now? If we can spot the dude that lost it...

'We got the feller that Ginger's wantin' bad to meet,' interrupted his friend. 'But we got to find that trail first. Know anythin' about this Sandy Parlour?'

'Yeah. I've crossed her once. She ain't as big as some, but there's too much of her to search. Our best bet is to keep along the edge to the right, an' watch for a trail comin' out.'

'An' the quicker we start, the sooner we get there,' said Green. 'C'mon.'

Hugging the border of the desert as closely as possible, they rode along. The elder man's thoughts were milling round the slaying of the cowboy. Had he been shot, it might have figured as a likely enough incident of the raid, but the knife-wound told a different story. Green believed that the boy had recognised one of the marauders, and incautiously betrayed the fact. Durran's tale was he had seen Bud fall from his horse at the first discharge, and concluding that he was done for, had shifted for himself, with the one idea of carrying the news to the ranch as soon as possible. Green could find nothing to disprove this, and yet he did not believe it.

CHAPTER VI

IN the big living-room of the Y Z ranch Old Simon and his daughter heard the foreman's account of the day's happenings. The girl's eyes filled with tears when the finding of Bud was related, for the boy was the youngest and one of the gayest in the outfit. The ranch-owner mumbled oaths in his beard and listened with a darkening face.

'What do yu make of it, Blaynes?' he asked, in perplexity.

'It's just what I've allus told yu,' replied the other, trying to keep a note of triumph out of his voice. 'Durran said as how they were "whoops"—every mother's son of 'em.'

"Funny they didn't loot the cabin," mused the old man. 'It ain't like Injuns to miss a bet like that.'

'Huh ! Reckon they didn't think of it. They was doin' pretty well to get away with the herd,' Rattler rejoined.

'Biggest loss we've had. 'Bout eighty head, yu say?'

The foreman nodded. 'All that,' he said.

'An' yu left Green an' Barton to search a piece further?'

'Yes, nothin' else for it; no use all of us a-foolin' around. I'd say it was a good chance for the new feller to do somethin', if he ain't a-doin' it already.'

Old Simon looked up sharply. 'Speak plain,' he said. 'What's yore idea?'

'Well, o' course, I ain't sayin' it's so,' Blaynes replied slowly; 'but look it over. We don't know nothin' about this feller. Yu take him on an' give him a free rein, an' 'stead of the rustlin' stoppin', it gets wuss.'

'Yu mean he's workin' with 'em?'

The foreman shrugged his shoulder and shot a glance at the girl.

'I don't say so,' he temporised. 'I'm on'y suggestin' what might be.'

'In that case he must be working with the Apaches,' said Noreen quietly. 'I shouldn't have thought he was a mean enough white to do that.'

Blaynes instantly saw the trap into which his eagerness to discredit Green had led him.

'It shore don't seem likely, I admit,' he said. 'But yu can't never tell. An' yu got to agree he ain't done much, so far.'

'Let us hope he finds the trail again,' the girl said. 'Surely a big bunch of cattle like that cannot be spirited away without leaving a trace.'

'That darned sandstorm come just at the right time for 'em,' grumbled the foreman. 'I've told the boys to be ready to start the minit we hear from Green.'

He went out, and for some time there was silence. Then the girl said impulsively:

'I don't believe it.'

'Don't believe what, honey?' asked her father.

'That Green is working with the Indians,' she replied. 'He doesn't look that sort of man.'

'This is a tough country, an' looks don't tell yu much,' commented Simon; 'but I don't hardly

think it's so myself. Any-ways, it is shore up to him to get busy an' prove himself.'

The day was far advanced when a shout from Green brought Barton, who had been riding a piece away, to his side, on the brink of a small draw which formed an outlet from the desert. On the sandy floor, protected from the wind by a highish bank, were the hoof prints of cattle and horses.

'Whoopee!' cried Larry. 'This must be where they come off the Parlour.'

"Pears so," Green agreed, and walked his horse down to examine the trail more closely. 'What do yu make o' that?'

Larry looked where his companion pointed, and gave vent to a low whistle. 'One of 'em has got off, an' he's wearin' boots—our kind o' boots,' he said.

In fact, the prints showed plainly that the footwear in question were of the narrow-soled variety affected by the cowboy, not out of vanity, but because they are of practical use to him in his work; roping on foot would be well-nigh impossible without them.

'There's a white man with 'em,' Larry decided.

'On'y one?' queried Green, a glint of humour wrinkling the corners of his eyes. 'Huh ! they ain't as clever as I figured. If I wanted to play at Injuns, boots is the first thing I would throw into the discard.'

Larry's eyes opened. 'Yu think it's a bunch o' whites masqueradin' as Injuns?' he asked.

'Shore,' was the confident reply. 'An' Bud was unlucky; he found out, an' they had to close his mouth.'

'I'll be damned if you ain't right!' ejaculated Larry, after a moment's thought.

Yu'll be damned anyway,' his friend retorted. 'Get a move on, an' we'll see where this trail takes us while the light holds.' They were able to make good time, for the trail was plain and easy to follow, twisting and turning where obstacles had to be overcome. Before they had gone many miles, however, they were forced to camp for the night. This they did under a rocky bluff which enabled them to make a fire without much risk of the light being visible. They had food with them, and this despatched, they rolled up in their blankets and slept like dead men. Sunrise saw them astir again, and breakfast over, they caught and saddled their mounts.

'Yu'd better strike for the Y Z an' fetch the boys,' Green said. 'Wish I'd brought Blue; he'd have made better time under yu than that bone-rack yu call a hoss.' For Green was riding the pony on which he had made his first appearance at Hatchett's Folly.

'Think so, do you?' replied Barton, who sensed the grin underlying the words. 'I ain't aimin' to straddle no volcano in eruption; yu shore oughtta call him Vesuvius, that brute. This little hoss is good enough for me.'

'Shore, I know that,' came the quick reply; 'but—'

'Yah! Go an' find a rustler, yu long-laigged misfit,' yelled Larry, as he rode away. 'An' don't hog all the glory by capturing the whole bunch before we get in the game.'

'I'll save a little one for yu,' Green told him. 'An' say, remember yu don't know nothin'; just be yore natural self.'

With a most disrespectful gesture, the boy rode off, and the older man smiled as he murmured, 'He's a good kid all right, but he shore has a lot to learn.'

He followed the tracks for an hour, and then found that they joined a bigger and evidently older trail which had a familiar appearance. He had covered only a mile or two when his suspicions were verified, for he stood again at the entrance to the blind canyon which he had stumbled upon before, with the wide shallow stream and the baffling stretch of hard ground

on the far side. Had the stolen cattle been driven across this and thrown on to the open trail leading to the Double X? Somehow he did not think so.

'Reckon I'll have another look at the canyon,' he decided. Forcing his horse into the water, he rode slowly upstream between the jaws of the gorge, looking closely on both sides for tracks. Presently he stopped short, for in a little sandy bay leading up to a cleft in the rock-face were the plain hoofprints of horses. Loosening his guns in their holsters, he followed the tracks. The cleft proved to be bigger than it looked, and almost choked with trees and brush, but a narrow path led up and out. Green rode slowly, head down to avoid the outflung branches on the trees, which got thicker as he climbed higher.

Suddenly came the swish of a rope, the loop dropped over his shoulders and he was yanked violently from the saddle; his horse, with a snort of fear, sprang from the trail and crashed from sight into the undergrowth. The moment Green struck the ground, which he did on his back, two men sprang upon him. They soon learned that despite the fact that his arms were pinioned, he was not done with. His right leg, drawn up to his body, shot out like a released spring, and the heel of his boot caught one of the charging men full in the stomach, hurling him, doubled up with agony, into the brush. His companion, however, flung himself full-length on the captive, and with the help of two more who now appeared on the scene succeeded in turning him on his face and tying his wrists securely behind him, having first slipped the rope under his armpits.

Now, fella, yu can either walk or be drug, which yu like,' growled one of the captors. Green struggled to his feet and followed in silence. The party appeared to consist of four only. All were dressed in cowboy garb, and had handkerchiefs, slitted for the eyes, over their faces, and hat-brims slouched down to further conceal their identity. The man Green had kicked was still complaining and cursing.

'Aw, stop yore belly-achin',' said one of the others. 'Yu musta bin loco to tackle him from the front.'

The hurt one spat out an oath in reply and staggered on up the winding path. Presently they stopped, and Green saw that they were on the tree-clad top of one of the walls of the canyon. Before them was a strip of grass, and then a straight drop of hundreds of feet on to the rocky floor below. The man who had addressed Green now spoke again: 'Them tracks down there was made a-purpose,' he sneered, 'an' yu shore walked into the trap, didn't yu? Well, we understand that yo're anxious to have a look at the country, an' we aim to give yu that same. We're agoin' to hang yu over the edge o' the cliff here. When yo're tired o' the view, let out a holler, an' perhaps someone'll hear yu.'

The others sniggered at the taunt, and the fellow who had been kicked added, 'An' it oughtta cure yu o' pokin' yore nose where it ain't wanted.'

'Thought it was his foot, Snub,' gibed a third, and was instantly and heartily cursed for the slip.

'Bah! what's the odds? He'll cash anyway,' he defended himself.

'Mebbe he will; but that don't excuse yu for bein' every sort of a damned fool,' came the angry retort.

Green held his peace. He realised that he was helpless and that any protest would be futile. That these men had carried out or assisted in the raid he had no doubt, and having secured their booty, they had laid a trap into which he had blundered. That they would not allow a trifle like murder to stand in their way the removal of Bud had already proved. Any hope of a

rescue by the Y Z boys he had himself destroyed by hiding his trail up the canyon.

'Anythin' to say?' queried the one who appeared to be the leader.

'What's the use?' retorted the prisoner coolly. 'Get on with the murder, yu pack o' cowardly coyotes.'

'Murder?' grinned the other. 'Why, we ain't goin' to do a thing to yu. O' course, if yu decide to stay where we put yu, it's more'n likely yu'll get hungry, but that's yore affair.'

He gestured with his hand to his followers, and while one of them secured the end of the lasso to the trunk of a neighbouring tree, the other two marched Green to the edge of the precipice, deftly knocked his legs from under him, hauling on the rope as he fell so that there was no sudden jerk. They left him swinging there against the face of the cliff, and he heard the mocking 'Adios' as they rode away.

Green realised that his chance of escape was a slim one indeed. He was in the depths of the wild country, and it might be weeks before another human being chanced that way. Beneath him was a sheer fall to the bed of the canyon; above, by tilting back his head, he could see the edge of the cliff a scant ten yards away. Only ten yards, but with his hands bound it might as well have been ten thousand. He strained at the thong on his wrists, but it was seasoned rawhide.

He fell to wondering how long a man could live without food and drink. Days, no doubt—days of unspeakable torture. Already the blazing sun seemed to have sucked every drop of moisture from his body, and he was thirsty. He had seen men die of thirst, and to get his mind on something else, he took his 'look at the country.' In other circumstances, the view would have impressed him with its savage grandeur. An unending succession of peaks, gorges, and forest-clad ridges stretched down from the Big Chief range and merged with expanses of rolling country in the direction in which he knew the Y Z ranch lay. Tiny streams, transformed by the blazing sun into winding strips of burnished silver, flashed here and there, while away on the left he could see a treeless blotch of yellow which he guessed must be Sandy Parlour.

A wheeling spot far away in the sky caught his roving eye, and his first thought was one of envy—the bird was free, it could go where it wished. Then a second spot joined the first, and a third. He watched them curiously; they were coming nearer, and apparently heading straight for the canyon.

'Vultures,' he muttered. 'Wonder what they've spotted?' No sooner were the words spoken than he knew—he himself was the attraction. 'God!' he said, and his fingers instinctively clawed the cliff behind him. 'An' that's why those hounds left me my guns, knowin' it would make it harder.'

Suddenly his whole body tensed : his clenching fingers had found a rough edge of rock, and by raising and lowering his wrists, he could chafe the thong against it. Feverishly he set to work, lacerating his hands in the process. The task was painfully laborious, since he could bring no pressure to bear, but it was his only hope. The vultures, now numbering half a dozen, came steadily on, and he could see in the stretch of sky other specks hastening to the feast.

'They ain't got me yet,' he gritted. 'Wonder how long I can keep 'em off by shoutin'?'

Resolutely he applied himself to his task, though his muscles ached and his whole body was faint with fatigue. The birds were near now; he could hear their fierce cries and the noise of their wings as they whirled above his head. He knew that it would not be long before they would descend to attack. The thought of those great, curved, cruel beaks and his own defenceless eyes made him shiver.

Lower and lower wheeled the wild scavengers of the desert, until suddenly one, hungrier or more daring than the rest, swooped down upon the prey. The man saw it coming and gave vent to a loud yell, which sent the attacking bird away on a wide sweep and momentarily scattered the others. But he knew they would quickly return, and worked desperately.

His fears were soon justified. The flapping of the great wings grew louder as the birds wheeled in lessening circles above him. Again one of them dashed at his face, but swerved when he shouted. Nevertheless, it passed so close that a wingtip brushed his cheek. The whole flock was now perilously near, and a combined swoop by several of the birds would be the beginning of the end.

Summoning all his remaining strength, he wrenched savagely at his bonds, and fancied he felt them give a little. Another supreme effort which nearly dislocated his wrists and the thong parted. Torn, bruised, and numb, it was some moments before he could use the hands he had freed. Then, spreading out and trying the fingers gingerly, he drew one of his guns and waited for the coming onslaught. He had obtained his freedom only just in time, for the vultures, sensing that he was helpless, and emboldened by increasing numbers, now bunched together and swept down upon him. Green waited until they were only a few yards distant, and then fired four shots into the thick of them. Three dropped flapping and screaming into the abyss, while the remainder whirled past and upwards, and were soon mere specks in the sky again. Having reloaded his weapon, Green dropped it back into the holster, and began chafing his numbed arms in preparation for the task of scaling the cliff. The stiffness mitigated, he twisted round to face the rock, gripped the rope as high as possible, and began hauling himself up hand over hand. It was no small job, even for one possessing the superb muscles with which a clean, open-air life had endowed the cowpuncher.

'Glad they wasted a new rope on me,' he panted, as he jerked and swayed dizzily over the chasm. 'An old one, an' them birds would've got their meal shore enough.'

Inch by inch he worked his way up, little roughnesses in the face of the cliff affording a slight hold for his toes and thus enabling him to rest occasionally, but his strength was fully spent when at last he dragged his weary body over the brink and lay gasping on the grass above. For ten minutes or more he remained prone on the ground, taking in great gulps of air, and oblivious to everything save the fact that the necessity for violent, incessant effort had ceased. Presently he stood up.

'Gosh, out it's grand to stand on a solid bit o' earth again!' he said. 'Never did like the notion o' dancin' on nothin'. Wonder how far that blamed boss o' mine went?'

He put his fingers to his mouth and gave a shrill whistle. Getting no result, he coiled the rope and made his way down the trail which had led to his undoing. When he reached the spot where he had been roped, he whistled again, and waited. Presently came the sound of something forcing its way through the brush and his pony appeared.

'Yu son of a gun,' said the cowpuncher, and his tone betrayed a whimsical affection, 'I shore didn't waste my time trainin' yu.'

A drink from his canteen refreshed him, and, mounting the horse, he climbed the cliff again to see if he could pick up the trail of his assailants. In this he was successful, and followed it for some miles, until it became lost in a wide cattle-trail which he took to be the one leading to the Double X, but whether the horsemen had gone to that ranch, or turned the other way, he could not discover.

'Reckon I'll call it a day,' he concluded, and turned his horse in the direction of the Y Z. At the corral he encountered Larry, and soon learned that the outfit had been no more

successful than he himself. They had followed him to the blind canyon, crossed the stream and the stretch of shale to the big trail, and then the foreman had decided that the quest was hopeless, and ordered them all back to the ranch.

'We was shore worried about yu—'specially Rattler,' the boy concluded. 'Where in 'ell did yu get to?'

'Oh, I was around,' replied Green. 'Any feller answerin' to the name of "Snub" in these parts?'

'Shore is. One of the Double X lot. Don't know anythin' of him. Yu don't think—'

'Yes, I do, sometimes,' smiled Green. 'It don't hurt, when yu get used to it. Yu oughtta try it.'

'If I didn't feel scared it would make me look like yu, I might,' countered Larry. 'Say, I near forgot it—the Old Man wants to see yu. I met Miss Norry just now an' she told me.'

'An' yu near forgot her message,' reproved Green, with twinkling eyes. 'Larry, I'm plumb ashamed of yu.'

'Aw, yu go to—' But Green was already on his way to the ranch-house.

He found Simon, with his daughter and Blaynes, sitting on the verandah, and, at the request of his employer, gave a bald account of what had happened to him. When he had finished, the foreman burst into a loud laugh, which was cut short when Noreen said indignantly:

'I don't see anything amusing about a cold-blooded attempt at murder.'

'Aw, Miss Noreen, yu got it wrong,' protested the offender. 'Them Double X boys—if it was them—was just playing a joke. They meant to leave him there to cook in the sun for an hour or two, until they come back to pull him up again. They certainly seem to have got yu scared, Green.'

'Scared? Why, I'm near grey-headed now,' returned Green, and grinned. 'Yu think it was just a joke, eh?'

'Shore of it,' replied the foreman.

'Well, yu know 'em better than I do,' was the meaning retort. 'Next time yu see yore friend Snub, tell him from me that practical jokin' is a game two can play at.'

'Yo're callin' the wrong card,' snapped the foreman. 'I ain't got no friends at the Double X, but if ever I meet this feller Snub I'll shore deliver yore message.'

'A pretty sort of practical joke,' the girl said contemptuously. 'It makes me shudder to think of those horrible birds.'

'They musta forgot to tell the vultures it was only a game,' Green said gravely, and had the satisfaction of seeing the foreman squirm when Noreen laughed at him. 'I understand yu lost the trail again?'

'We follered it as far as it went,' snorted the other. 'I'm as good as the next at teadin' sign, but I don't claim to be able to see it when it ain't there.'

'Well, we don't appear to be gettin' any forrader,' interposed Old Simon. 'Yu'd better turn in, Blaynes; yu've had a long day.'

This was a dismissal, and the foreman, very unwillingly, had to take his departure. When he had gone, the ranch-owner turned to the cowpuncher.

'The joke idea don't appeal to yu none?'

Green smiled. 'I reckon my sense o' humour must be some shy,' he said.

'Think the Double X is mixed up in the rustlin'?'

'I dunno, I got nothin' on them—yet; but have yu ever thought what a nice convenient brand the Double X might be? See here.'

He took pencil and paper from his pocket, drew something, and handed the result to Old Simon. 'There's yore brand,' he said, 'an' by the side of it is what a smart feller with a runnin'

iron an' a wet blanket might do to it.'

The ranch-owner gave one glance at the paper and swore softly. 'By heaven, it's as easy as takin' a drink ! I've a mind to call Dexter's hand to-morrow.'

'That won't get yu nowhere,' Green pointed out. 'If they're doin' it, yu can bet they're coverin' their tracks, an' my hunch is that they ain't in it alone. We gotta get more evidence; yu couldn't hang a dog on this.'

'Mebbe yo're right,' Simon admitted. 'So yu guess it's whites passin' as Injuns? Blaynes warn't so wide o' the mark then.' 'It is only a guess, an' we'd better keep it under our hats for the present,' Green replied. 'Any other ranch round here been losin' cattle?'

'There's only the Frying Pan, thirty mile to the west of us. I saw Leeming, the boss, in Hatchett's a week or so back, an' he didn't have any complaints.'

Several times during the conversation Green's glance had unconsciously rested on Noreen, and he had been disconcerted to find that on each occasion she had been regarding him steadily. Sitting there in the fading light, she made a picture to content any man. The recent tragedy had left its mark upon her, and instead of a merry, laughing girl, he now saw a serious, sweet-faced woman. 'Larry will be a very lucky chap,' he thought, and was instantly conscious that he did not believe it.

'Well, I'll be driftin' along,' he said, rising. 'Let yu know if there's anythin' fresh.'

'Don't you think, Daddy, that Mr. Green ought to have help?' Noreen asked quietly.

'Why, that's a good notion, girl,' her father said instantly. 'What about takin' one o' the boys with yu, Green?'

'It's shore kind o' Miss Noreen to suggest it, an' I hope the time's comin' when I'll need assistance, but till it does come I'd rather go it single-handed,' the cowpuncher replied. 'I guess Barton would jump at the invite. Mebbe yu were thinkin' of him?' he added with a smile.

'I hadn't anyone in particular in mind,' Noreen returned. 'I should have thought Larry had not sufficient experience; he is only a boy.'

'He's a mighty good one—I wouldn't ask for a better,' said Green, and the girl wondered at the sudden warmth in his tone.

'Oh, I'm sure of that; but he's so—young,' she explained lamely.

'Well, I guess he'll grow out o' that soon enough,' chuckled Simon. 'Anyways, yu can have him, or any o' the others when yu say, Green.'

Walking back to the bunkhouse, the puncher turned the conversation over in his mind, and came to the conclusion that Larry would not be lucky. 'Only a boy ! An' he's a coupla years older than she is,' he murmured. 'Women shore age quicker'n we do.'

His entrance into the bunkhouse was the signal for a burst of merriment from the older men, and he immediately divined that the foreman had been relating the story of his discomfiture. Durran was the first to fire a shot.

'I hear as how yu bin havin' a look at the country, Green,' he said, with a wide grin.

'An' that yu found the rustlers' hang-out,' added Nigger, with a marked emphasis on the last word.

Will yu walk into my parlour, said the spider to the fly,' hummed another. 'An' the fly wasn't fly enough to.'

A shout of laughter greeted this effort, and Durran slapped the singer enthusiastically on the

back. "That's damned good, Bent," he cried. "The spider—haw, haw! Damned good, that is. An' do yu reckon the parlour mighta bin a sandy one?"

"I guess likely it was," grinned Bent. "An' the unsuspecting insect musta belonged to the specie the gardener sharps call greenfly."

This sally produced a positive howl of mirth, and Durran rocked to and fro, slapping the humorist's back, and murmuring, "Yu shore will be the death o' me, Bent."

The man at whom these gibes were directed looked around with a sardonic smile. He saw Larry and his little following were taking no part in the merriment, and that Snap Lunt was watching him curiously. The little gunman did not appear to be amused, but he was clearly interested. Dropping easily into a seat, Green waited until all the would-be wits had had their say and then fired a return shot.

"This is shore the best-tempered outfit I ever met up with," and there was an edge on his voice which cut like a razor. "Why, if any gang had run a blazer like this "joke" on the old K T in Texas, the boys would've painted for war immediate. But I reckon yu ain't called "Wise-heads" for nothin', and the Double X has got yu right buffaloed."

This was another aspect of the affair, and even the loudest laughers looked a bit uncomfortable, while on the younger men the effect was electrical. Ginger sprang to his feet instantly.

"Buffaloed nothin'," he cried. "Why, if anybody's goin' to think that, me an' two-three of us'll go an' corral the Double X gang an' hang 'em over the cliff in their own ropes."

Green laughed. "Sho, that wouldn't be the act of a "Wise-head," Ginger," he reproved. "Yu needn't to worry none about them jokers, either—they'll get theirs. I don't need help to curry a little hoss like that. An' yore foreman'll tell yu that yu got a bigger job. Yu gotta find the Injuns who are rustlin' steers an' killin' yore friends."

"I thought that was yore job," sneered Blaynes.

"Why, I believe the Old man did say somethin' about it," replied the puncher evenly. "I'll have to 'tend to it."

"An' watch out for the spider," jeered Durran.

"I shore will. I'm obliged to yu for remindin' me, Durran," smiled Green, not failing to note the scowl which the foreman directed at the speaker.

CHAPTER VII

ON the following morning a rider spurred his mount down the main and only street of Hatchett's Folly, and found it, as he had expected at that time of the day, deserted, save for a dog or two prowling in search of spots where the blistering sun could not reach them with its full intensity. Without troubling to slow up, he wrenched a bit and brought his horse to a sliding stop in front of the Folly saloon, the dug-in hoofs sending up clouds of dust. He was a short, stoutish man of about thirty, with hair almost bleached by the sun, and a blob of a nose which had heavenly aspirations and had got its owner into more trouble than any respectable nose should.

Dismounting with a whoop, he hitched his pony to the rail, and entered the saloon. He found it almost as deserted as the street outside. Two men were playing cards in a desultory way at one of the tables, and another was leaning carelessly against the bar, talking to Silas. One glance at this third made the newcomer stiffen and hesitate in the doorway; but it was too late for retreat: the barkeeper had seen him.

"Howdy, Snub! Come right in," he called. "How long yu bin sufferin' from it?"

"Sufferin' from what?" asked the other, as he complied with the invitation.

'Bashfulness at the sight of a bar,' was the reply.

'Ain't never had it,' retorted the newcomer. 'That sun's powerful glary out there, an' for a minit I couldn't see a thing.'

At the mention of the name, Green shot one swift glance at the man, but showed no other sign of interest. Snub exchanged greetings with the other two citizens and poured himself a generous drink from the bottle Silas pushed forward.

'How's tricks at the Double X?' asked that worthy.

'So so. Them damn Injuns lifted another half-dozen head, an' Dex is hoppin' mad about it,' replied the puncher, watching Green warily as he spoke. Did the fellow know him or not? He wondered. The nickname so incautiously divulged in the canyon might have escaped the captive's notice; there was nothing in the lounging figure to lead him to think otherwise, and he began to feel easier. Rolling a cigarette, he put it between his lips and struck a match. He was in the act of lighting up when a shot crashed, and the bullet twitched the burning wood from his fingers. It was immediately followed by a second, which removed half of his cigarette, and a third which tore away the remaining portion, leaving only fragments of paper and tobacco clinging to his lips.

'What the 'ell?' he gasped, gazing pop-eyed at the still-lolling stranger, whose eyes gleamed with satanic amusement, and around whose hips blue smoke was eddying.

'Just a little joke—little practical joke, friend—habit I got,' explained the marksman in a soft drawling voice. 'Seein' that I've just naturally ruined yore smoke, have a cigar with me.'

He motioned to Silas, threw the money on the counter and went out, unconcernedly turning his broad back and offering an easy target. But Snub watched him go in a kind of trance.

'My Gawd!' he said in an awed voice. 'Three shots, firin' from the hip. An' I was watchin' him an' never saw a move. Who is he?'

'That's the new "Wise-head" puncher,' said the barkeeper with a sly smile, for he had his own opinion of Snub, and was not greatly grieved to see him set back a little.

'I know that. An' he's shore got the right brand. But who is he?' persisted the victim of the 'little joke.' Then, with a shaky laugh, he added, 'An' that's the feller Poker is claimin' he'll get. Well, he can have him—entire—hide, horns, hoofs, an' taller. I don't want none m'self.'

'Yu oughtta be thankful yore nose is set the way it is,' grinned Silas. 'If yu had bin a Jew, yore smeller woulda bin plumb spoiled by that last shot.'

'An' that's awful true,' chimed in another voice, and Snap Lunt joined them. 'Lo, Silas. 'Lo, Snub; yu look like yu been seein' visions.'

'Did yu see it, Snap?' asked the bartender.

'Yeah, I was at the door,' was the reply. 'Pretty fair shootin'.' 'Pretty fair shootin'?' repeated the indignant victim. 'Why, I reckon even yu couldn't equal it, Snap.'

'Mebbe not,' retorted the gunman, with the nearest thing to a smile that ever appeared on his face. 'But roll yoreself a pill; I'm willin' to try.'

'Not on me, yu won't,' Snub said instantly. 'I take it back. Yu could do it—an' more. I don't want no proof. Here, Silas, give this bloody-minded sharp-shooter somethin' else to think of. An' he called it a joke, Snap. What yu think o' that?'

'Well, if that's his idea of a joke, I should walk round him, a long way round him—mile or so—when he's feelin' humorous,' Lunt replied. Meanwhile the subject of this conversation, on leaving the saloon, had gone to the main emporium of the place, a sort of general store which stood next to the hotel. He had not noticed Snap, for the gunman, seeing that he was about to come out, had slipped round the corner of the Folly. He found the proprietor, a grizzled old

pioneer of sixty, ready to talk.

Was that shootin' I heard over to the s'loon?' he asked.

'Only a puncher a-showin' off. No harm done,' Green toldhim. 'Gimmee two boxes o' forty-fives an' a coupla sacks o' smokin'. Don't sell no cigarette-making machines, I s'pose?' 'Never heard tell of 'em,' said the merchant. 'Fellers 'bout here all got fingers.'

'Yu been here a long whiles?' the puncher queried, while the ordered goods were being produced.

'I helped to start the blasted place—come in with old Hatchett hisself. Yessir, an' we all reckoned we was goin' to strike it rich, but it was a false alarm. My, but she was a lively town while the gold-boom lasted ! An' there was more money in undertakin' than minim'. I expect I'm about the on'y one o' that crowd left.'

'Yu was here when Old Simon sifted in from—now where was it I heard he came from?'

'Texas. Though I can't call to mind the name o' the place. Yes, that'd be around eighteen years back. It was him comin' decided me to stop on. Curious feller, Old Simon. Kept his affairs strictly under his own hat. Allus give me the idea he didn't want to be found.'

'How was that?' Green asked interestedly.

'Just a fancy o' mine, p'raps; but years ago I've seen him in thisyer store, an' if a stranger come into town he'd keep outa sight till he'd had a good look at him.'

'Ever see his wife?'

'He didn't have none when he come here. There was just him, and the girl, and a Injun woman to keep house an' look after the kid.'

Glancing out of the door, Green saw the Double X puncher crossing the street to the hotel, outside which he was joined by the slouching figure of the gambler, Poker Pete. They stood conversing a few moments, and then the cowboy got his horse, mounted, and rode in the direction of his ranch. His companion re-entered the hotel. Green turned to the storekeeper.

'How long has that tinhorn card-sharp, Pete, been infestin' these parts?' he asked.

The old man made a gesture of caution. 'For the love o' Mike don't shout it,' he urged. 'While I allow he's all that an' more, it ain't no ways wise to say so. He's got a powerful pull in these parts, an' fellers as go against him don't seem to last long. He don't live here—been sort o' payin' visits off an' on 'bout two years, stayin' at the hotel.'

'Well, I'm shore scared,' laughed the customer, as he paid for his purchases. 'So long, old-timer.'

Crossing the street, he mounted his horse, fully conscious that he was being watched by at least a dozen citizens. The story of his 'joke' on Snub was now common property and men who had not seen the shooting naturally wanted a look at the man who had done it. Opposite the hotel he pulled up and sat looking at the building. 'The buzzard shan't say I didn't give him a chance no make a play,' he muntered. But the gambler did not appear, and after a wait of some minutes, Green rode on.

Three miles out of the town the trail forked, one way leading to the Y Z, and the other to the Double X. Green hesitated here, and then selected the latter. Passing through a narrow, winding gorge a faint clink, as of metal upon stone, warned him that another traveller was behind. He could see no one, but not feeling in the mood for risks, promptly took cover behind a clump of scrub-oak some ten yards from the trail. As the rider emerged round the bend, the watcher gripped the nostrils of his pony to prevent it from whinnying. The other traveller proved to be Poker Pete. He loped past unsuspectingly, hunched in his saddle, and with a dark frown on his unprepossessing features.

Now where's he goin'?" speculated the cowboy. 'Can't be follerin' me—he'd expect me to take the other trail. Well, there's on'y one way to find out.'

He mounned and rode cautiously in the wake of the gambler, keeping well to the rear, and guiding his horse into the soft parts of the trail so that no sound of hoof should reach the man in front. The frequent bends and twists in the trail made it a simple matter to keep out of sight. It was after a rather abrupt turn that he feared he had lost his quarry. The gambler was not in view, despite a straight stretch ahead which he could hardly have covered in the time without a considerable speeding up. Green looked about for another explanation of his disappearance. A cracking twig supplied one. It came from a narrow draw on the left of the trail. There was a faint pathway, and the puncher, keeping a wary eye on the undergrowth, followed it. Presently a thin spiral of smoke showed against the right-hand wall of the draw, and he heard a voice say: "Lo, Pete. Yu bin a long time a-comin'!"

Green slid from the saddle, tied the animal in the bushes, and began to climb the side of the draw. Foot by foot he worked his way up and along until, by parting the coarse grass, he could see the spot from which the smoke was ascending. By the side of a small fire Pete and Snub were squatting cross-legged, and the cowboy was pouring coffee from a battered pot into two tin mugs. Green had missed some of the conversation, but he soon gathered that Pete was in a vile temper.

'Four of yu, an' then yu had to let him get away,' he sneered. 'Why didn't yu bump him off an' plant him 'stead o' makin' that fool-play?'

'It looked a shore thing,' remonstrated the other. 'Blamed if I know how he got clear—must be a wizard.'

The gambler made a gesture of disgust. 'Wizard nothin'. O' course somebody happened along an' helped him; an' he's got the laugh on yu.'

'He shore has, an' a new rope into the bargain,' agreed the puncher, with a grin which aggravated his companion still further.

'Yu don't appear to be able to get it into yore head that this feller is dangerous—dangerous, I tell yu,' he rapped out.

'My gracious, yu don't say! Fancy me never suspectin that!' was the ironical retort.

'An' yu had another chance, back there in the Folly,' the gambler went on. 'He shoots yu up an' turns his back on yu, an' yu got yore gun. 'Stead o' beefin' him, yu stand there like a blasted image.'

'Yu seen that, did yu?' inquired Snub.

'I was told by them that did,' replied Pete. 'They said yu was scared cold.'

'They was right,' Snub admitted. 'I'm allus willin' to take a chance, but there warn't no chance. If I'd pulled my gun I wouldn't be here a-talkin' to you—not that I'd be missin' much thataway. I knew he'd get me, an' I knew too that he wanted me to draw—he was playin' for it. I ain't near tired o' life yet, an' I ain't no cat neither, with nine of 'em to gamble with.'

'Shucks! I never seen the gun-slinger yet that couldn't be got,' sneered Pete. 'But o' course if yo're scared...'

'I am,' said Snub. 'But that don't go for everybody. If yu think yu can ride me...'

There was an ugly look on his face, and his right hand was not far from his gun. The man on the opposite side of the fire laughed crossly.

'I ain't tryin' to ride yu, yu fool,' he said. 'We gotta work together, and this feller is interferin' an' has gotta be suppressed.'

'Good word that! Might mean anythin',' laughed the puncher. 'Well, go to it, Pete. Yu shore have my best wishes. An' if there's any particular spot yu'd like to be buried in, let me know, an' I'll tend to it. Yu near got him once, didn't yu?'

The gambler swore luridly, and his fingers inched to pull the shoulder gun and shoot down the man who jeered at him, but the lifelong habit of control engendered by his profession enabled him to conceal his feelings.

'I was unlucky,' he said quietly. 'The game ain't played out yet.'

'Yu better tell Spider—' the puncher began.

'Shut yore fool trap,' fiercely interrupted the other, with an anxious glance round. 'Ain't yu got more sense than to say names?'

'Well, who's to hear 'em in this Gawd-forsaken spot?' protested the puncher. 'Yu don't reckon the cayuses'll tell, do yu?'

The gambler shrugged his shoulders. 'Seems like I gotta work with a passel o' idiots,' he said contemptuously. 'Less I do everythin' myself there's nothin' but mistakes. What lunatic wiped Bud out? No, don't tell me—I could see yu was just agoin' to.' He got up and walked to where his horse was tied. 'Tell the others whan I told yu, an' for all our sakes, keep that gap in your face closed,' were his final words as he mounted and rode back to the trail. His companion watched him vanish with a savage scowl.

'For less than half o' nothin' I'd just naturally blow yu apart, yu old lizard,' he growled. 'Yu come mighty near bein' buzzard meat once or twice.'

Green remained in his hiding-place until Snub had followed the gambler out of the draw, chewing over what he had heard. That the rustling was the work of white men was now beyond doubt, and at least some of the Double X gang were involved in it. He had nearly learned the name of the slayer of Bud, but the gambler had been too quick. The name that had escaped had been Spider. Green recalled Bent's quotation in the bunkhouse when they were joshing him, and Durran's enormous appreciation of what was apparently a not very notable witticism. Here was another little problem to solve.

'Things is boilin' up into a pretty mess,' was the cowpuncher's comment as he mounted and rode out of the draw. Reaching the spot where the trail forked, he turned and headed for the Y Z. An hour's ride brought him within a few miles of his destination, but no nearer to a solution of the tangle he was trying to unravel. Presently, at a point where the road wound up over a rocky ridge, his horse slanted its ears and whickered. Looking up, he saw a saddled pony, the reins looped over the horn, contentedly cropping the grass along the trail side. The animal was a pinto, and he recognised it as one frequently ridden by Noreen. Securing the horse, he uttered a loud call, and a faint cry of 'Help!' came in response.

Leading the pinto, he forced his way into the undergrowth in the direction he fancied the cry had come from and shouted again. Once more the reply came, but very feebly, and Green hurried. Soon he emerged on a little plateau covered with grass, from the edge of which the ground dropped almost vertically into a gully. At one spot the plateau was broken off sharply, as though a miniature landslide had occurred. Looking down, he saw the girl, clinging desperately to a stunted shrub about thirty feet below him. A narrow ledge gave her a little support, but it was obvious that she was exhausted and could not maintain her position much longer. 'Hang on; I'm a-comin',' he shouted.

She had not the strength to reply, but a movement of the head told him that she had heard.

Rapidly he uncoiled his rope, and thanking his stars that he was not riding Blue, who was still an uncertain quantity, fastened one end of it to the saddlehorn. The loop he slipped under his armpits, with a grim smile at the thought that this time he was hanging himself over the cliff. At the first pull on the rope the sturdy little cow-pony stiffened and prepared to take the weight; it knew what was wanted and could be trusted to do its part. Choosing a point not directly over the girl, in order to avoid sending any loose debris he might dislodge down upon her, Green gripped the rope and began the descent. As soon as he was low enough, he clawed

his way to the little ledge on which she was partly lying. Standing on this precarious footing, he contrived to stoop and lift the almost senseless girl with his right arm.

'Lock yore hands round my neck an' hold on tight,' he said, brusquely. 'The hoss'll pull us up.'

He gave a familiar call and braced himself for the strain. The rope tightened with a jerk, they swung loose from the ledge, and were being gradually raised as the knowing little pony paced slowly back. With his left arm and his legs the puncher did his best to avoid the inequalities and projections of the earth wall up which they were being drawn, but both of them were bruised and breathless when at length they were dragged over the rim of the plateau. The girl, indeed, was still well-nigh unconscious. Flinging off the rope, Green staggered to his feet and fetched his canteen. The waner soon revived her.

'Where am I?' she asked weakly, and then, with a shiver, 'Oh, I remember! I sat down and the ground gave way under me. I seemed to fall miles. How did you find me?'

'I met up with yore pony. Plumb lucky yu forgot to trail the reins, or he wouldn't 'a' drifted,' Green replied. 'Do yu reckon yu can stand up?'

The girl flushed at the realisation that she was reclining against his knee, and that he had been the first to think of it. 'I am all right now,' she said hastily, and stood up. 'How did you get me up the cliff?'

'The little hors just naturally hauled the pair of us up; nothin' to that,' the puncher said nonchalantly. 'We seem to have collected some real estate on the trip, though.'

He helped her brush the dust from her clothes and brought her pony. His matter-of-fact treatment of the incident and evident desire not to prolong it were in keeping with his invariable attitude towards her, and aroused an indefinite feeling of resentment; it savoured of indifference, and she was not accustomed to that form of treatment from the opposite sex. Any of the other boys... She put the ungrateful thought from her and turned to him impulsively.

'I have to thank you again for coming to my rescue,' she said. 'You will begin to look upon me as a nuisance.'

His right spur went home, and the pony promptly resented it by standing on its hind legs. By the time the rider had subdued this ebullition, he had his reply ready.

'Why, I reckon I'm plain lucky, that's all,' he said gravely.

'I should have it that the luck is on my side,' she replied. 'But for you I should now be—' She shook her head to banish the ugly picture, and added, 'Yes I am going to ask you to do something more.'

'I'll be pleased,' he said simply.

'It is only that I want you to say nothing of this—this accident—to my father. My motive is not entirely selfish, though I am afraid he would stop my rides, and I love them, but he worries about me quite enough as it is, and just now he has much to trouble him.'

'I wasn't intendin' ' He stopped suddenly. Confound it, did she think he would go glory-hunting to his employer? This aspect of her request had just occurred to the girl.

'You see, he has only me,' she said lamely.

'Yu won't remember yore mother, I expect,' Green said, deliberately changing the subject.

'No, I might almost say I never had one,' she replied. 'I think even the memory of a monher must be much for a girl.'

The puncher nodded his head. 'But yu got yore dad,' he resumed. 'Parents shore mean a lot, an' I guess a kid that starts life without any is some handicapped.'

Something in his voice told her he was speaking of himself. 'It must make a difference,' she

agreed. 'I'm sorry if you—' 'Yes,' he said reminiscently. 'All the parents I can remember was an old Piute squaw an' her man, who used to travel the country sellin' hosses. I was raised among Injuns. The old woman told me I was white, but she never explained how I come to be with 'em. They stole me, likely. Then a cattleman they sold some ponies to saw me an' made a dicker with 'em; took me to his ranch and treated me like a son. He was shore a regular man. Yu see, he was all alone too.'

'And he is—dead?'

'Yes. He passed out 'bout three years back, an' I lost my only friend.'

She was silent for a few moments, and he guessed what was in her mind. 'Yu are wonderin' why I'm workin' as a cowhand when I oughtta be ownin' a ranch. It's easy explained. When my friend died he was a broken-hearted an' ruined man: his wife had a fatal illness a few years after they married, their onlychild was kidnapped by an enemy before he met up with me, an' another scoundrel robbed him of well-nigh everythin'. All he had to leave me was his debt to these two men, an' I'm meanin' to pay it—when I find 'em; not for anythin' I lost, but for what they made him suffer.'

The girl shivered. The threat to the unknown offenders had been quietly spoken, but she sensed the implacable resolve underlying the words. This grim-faced man meant what he said; he would show the patience and tenacity of a vengeful Indian on the trail of a foe, and little, if any, more mercy.

'They may be dead by now,' she ventured.

'So much the better—for them,' Green replied; 'but I'm bettin' they're still above ground. This is a big country, an' I've only been searchin' three years.'

Silence again fell on them, for the girl was awed by the intensity of a hatred which could keep a man on such a quest for so long a time. Then the puncher spoke again and his tone was apologetic.

'I'm shore sorry, Miss Noreen. I don't know what come over me pesterin' yu with my dreadful past in this fashion. Yu must think I'm loco.'

'No, I've been very interested—and sorry,' the girl protested. 'I hope you won't find those men.'

'Yo're condemnin' me to a solitary life,' returned he, with a smile, and again she realised the granite hardness beneath the smooth voice. 'We are near the ranch now; yu had better go ahead.'

She put out her hand, thanked him again, and rode on. Neither of them noticed a dark face, with sneering, vengeful eyes, watching them from a near-by thicket. Green waited a while and then rode slowly to the ranch.

When Simon came in shortly after his daughter's return she saw at once that something was wrong. The old man's face wore a look of annoyance, and his voice was almost harsh when he said:

'Hear yu been ridin' with Green.'

'Who told you that?' asked the girl.

'That ain't nothin' to do with it,' replied her father. 'I'm askin' yu.'

'I went out for a ride, and on my way home I met Green, and he accompanied me part of the way,' said Noreen. 'Do you object to me speaking to our boys if I meet them?'

'No o' course not; yo're getnin' me all wrong,' said Simon uncomfortably. 'But this feller is new, an', as Blaynes sez to me just now, he ain't told us nothin' about himeslf.'

'So in was Blaynes who gave you this interesting information, was it?' she asked indignantly.

'Now don't yu go sourin' on him. He's foreman, an' it's his duty to report to me anythin' he

thinks I oughta know.'

'He's not foreman over me, and I won't have him spying on my actions, the miserable sneak!' retorted the girl spiritedly. 'Green at least behaves like a gentleman, and as for knowing nothing about him, he told me quite a lot.'

She proceeded to repeat what she knew of the new man's past, and was astonished to see her father's face darken and to hear a muttered oath.

'Why, Daddy, what's the matter?' she asked.

He dropped into a chair before replying. 'Twinge o' rheumatism—gets me every now an' then. Reckon I'm growin' old, girl. Now about this chap, Green. Dessay he's all right, an' there's no harm in passin' the time o' day if yu meet, but I don't want yu to be too familiar with any o' the boys, see? Sooner or later yu will own this ranch an' have to boss 'em.'

'I do that now,' she retorted saucily.

'Well, I guess yu do, an' the old man as well,' he agreed. 'Sorry if I seemed riled, girlie, but things is worryin' just now. Yu won't hold it agin me, will yu?'

Noreen kissed him tenderly. 'Of course I won't, you dear old silly,' she said, and in her mind she added, 'But that doesn't apply to your case, Mr. Rattler Blaynes.'

CHAPTER VIII

Old Nugget was receiving company. Seated round the rude table in his shack were half a dozen men, in addition to himself, smoking, drinking, and conversing in lowered voices. Poker Pete, his small porcine eyes covertly watching everyone, dominated the talk. He and Dexter, from the Double X, appeared to have some authority over the rest.

'We gotta ease up on yore ranch, Rattler, till this damned feller Green is put out o' business,' Pete stated. 'We can't afford to take no more risks. Better give the Frying Pan a whirl; they got some good stock there.'

'They shore has—I was lookin' some of it over the other day,' laughed Dexter, and then, as he caught a sharp look from the gambler, he added, 'No, they didn't see me—don't yu worry, old-timer.'

'We can fetch 'em across the "Wise-head" range—streuth! Old Simon struck a bum brand when he hit on that—an' through the Parlour as usual,' remarked a tall abnormally thin puncher, who was known at the Double X as 'Post' Adams. 'Leeming will think Simon's bin helpin' hisself,' said one of the others.

There was a general laugh at this, and in the midst of it the door opened and another man stepped in. It was Snap Lunt. 'Lo Snap. Find yoreself a seat,' greeted Pete.

'I ain't stayin' long,' replied the gunman, and for a moment there was a tense silence; all present realised that this latest arrival had not come in friendship. 'I'm here just to serve notice that I'm through with this game,' Snap finished.

Standing there, his hands hanging down, he watched the effect of his announcement. He knew perfectly well that his life hung on a thread, and that only his known reputation kept him from being instantly shot to pieces. Also, he had planned well in coming late, for with his back to the half-open door he had a line of retreat, and all of the others were in front of him.

'Bit of a tardy repentance, Snap, ain't it?' Poker Pete said coldly.

'Mebbe,' said the other. 'I ain't claimin' to be any better'n the rest, but when it comes to knifin' fellers in my own outfit, or hangin' 'em alive over the rocks for buzzards to feed on, I'm done.'

'Aw, Bud was an accident, an' that other play warn't nothin' but a joke, Snap,' Dexner protested, though there was a grin on his face as he spoke.

The little gunman's lips stiffened into a sneer. 'Keep that hogwash for them as is likely to swaller it, Dex,' he said. 'Understand, I'm through. Any o' yu got notions?'

It was a direct challenge, and the maker awaited the outcome with narrowed eyes and ready fingers, while the men he faced reckoned up the chances. They could kill him, beyond doubt, but they knew it could not be done before the claw-like hands hovering over the gun-butts got to work. Some of them would never see another sunrise. For a moment Death hesitated over the spot—and passed on. The gambler shook his head slightly, as though answering his own thought, and then said:

'We're shore sorry to lose yu, Snap, but she's a free country. I take it yu won't snitch?'
'Yu take it correct, an' I'm plumb glad yu put it the way yu did,' retorted Snap meaningly.
'That's one o' the things I never done, an' I ain't aimin' to start now. What I know I'll keep under my hat.'

'An' I s'pose we'll have to reckon yu against us?' put in Blaynes.

'I'm doin' my duty to the man that pays me; take that how yu like,' came the answer.

'Ain't got religion, have yu, Snap?' sneered Post Adams. 'Shore, an' here are my prayer-books. Yu want to be converted?'

His fingers swept the walnut handles protruding from the low-hung holsters, his body crouched as though about to spring, and his face was a mask of ferocity as he glared at the last speaker. It was Pete who averted the catastrophe. He had seen many shootings, and he knew that one type of killer always works himself into a fury before getting his man, with the object, perhaps, of justifying the deed to himself.

'We don't want no gun-play here,' he said, 'an' I'll drill the first man that pulls. Yu shut yore face, Post. It's a free country, like I said afore, an' if Snap don't want to sit in the game no longer, he's got a right to throw his hand in. Anythin' more to say, Lunt? 'Cause we got business to talk over what won't interest yu now.'

'On'y this,' Snap said. 'If there's a feller here who wants to argue with me at any time 'bout what I choose to do, he knows where to find me.'

His narrowed eyes watched Adams as he spoke, and there was no doubt as to whom the invitation was meant for, but the Double X puncher made no reply; he had courage, but the little gunman was a chilly proposition. Snap waited for a few moments and then, with a sneering laugh, backed slowly to the door, slid through and closed it behind him. Not until they heard the splashing of his horse fording the creek did anyone speak, and then Dexter said:

'We lose a useful man. Is it safe to trust him?'

'I'm sayin' it ain't—he'll snitch as shore as hell,' Adams put in. 'Yu oughtta let us get him, Pete.'

'Think so, do yu?' sneered the gambler. 'If I'd been fool enough to do that we'd have lost three or four useful men. Snap's quicker than any of us, an' he came loaded for trouble. O' course, if yu reckon he ain't to be relied on, there's time aplenty to make it safe. He's headed for the Y Z, an' I don't suppose he'll hurry. The side trail'd put yu ahead o' him an' he'll be in plain sight where the trail skirts The Gut. Me, I ain't worryin'. I dunno why he's throwed us down, but I think he's square.'

Thus he cunningly dissociated himself from the murder of the renegade, while giving it his sanction and even egging the others on to the deed. As he had expected, Post Adams got up at once; the gunman's challenge, which he had not dared to take up, rankled deeply.

'Better be shore than sorry, I guess,' he said. 'Who's a-comin'?''

'I'm with yu, Post. Never did like that little runt anyway,' said another of the Double X men, a heavy, stolid fellow of Teutonic extraction, who answered to the name of 'Dutch.' 'Any more?' asked Post, looking round.

'Ain't two o' you enough to bush-whack one man?' gibed Rattler. 'What yu skeered of?'

'Not o' yu, anyway,' snapped Adams, as he stamped out of the room, followed by Dutch.

The flat report of a rifle-shot, followed in a moment by a second and then a third, made Green pull in his horse, and then force the animal down the slope of the ridge along which he had been riding; a man on the skyline makes too good a target. Again the three shots rang out, the second instantly followed by the third.

'Two to one,' decided the puncher. 'Mr. First Man fires, an' when Mr. Single replies, Mr. Second pumps one into his smoke. I reckon it may be worth lookin' into.'

Dismounting and tying his horse, he took his rifle from the saddle and stole cautiously down a steepish declivity in the direction he believed the man he called Mr. Single to be. Soon he came upon a horse tied in a ouch of cottonwoods, and bearing the Y Z brand. A little further on, stretched full length behind a small boulder and cuddling the stock of his Winchester repeater, was a man he instantly recognised as Snap Lunt. He had no hat, and was cursing painstakingly.

"Lo, Snap. What's the trouble?" Green asked.

Like a flash the head of the prostrate man came round, and his left hand went to his hip, only to fall away again when he saw who the newcomer was. He grinned.

'Two jaspers over there cut down on me as I came along the trail,' he explained. 'One of 'em lifted my hat, an' if I'd bin four inches taller'n I am, I'd be choosin' my harp right now.' 'Know 'em?' asked Green.

'I ain't dead shore, but I got notions,' replied the gunman. 'There's another chunk o' rock over there, an' if yo're goin' to stay yu'd better freeze to it, though there ain't no call for yu to take a hand.'

'I'm aimin' to,' Green returned, sliding down behind the cover indicated. 'Two to one ain't fair, an' I always did hate a bush-whacker anyways.'

'Good for yu,' assented Snap. 'We'll give them coyotes a little surprise. They're shootin' at my smoke; when the second feller fires, give him hell.'

They were lying on the slope of a saucer-like depression, and about twenty yards lower down lay the trail to the ranch. Beyond this was a level stretch of open grass from four to five hundred yards in width. On the far side the ground rose again, and was covered with rock debris and brush. It was an ideal spot for an ambush-party, for if they missed their aim they could not be approached without deadly peril, and they could withdraw at any time unobserved.

Presently a puff of smoke bellied out from a clump of brush opposite Green, and Snap fired. Instantly another shot came from ten yards to the right, and a bullet splintered the rock in front of the gunman. Green sent two shots in quick succession to the address of the second marksman, and through the clear air came a stifled curse.

'Did he get yu?' asked a high pitched voice.

'Burned my ear, blast him!' came the reply. 'How'd he get over there? Must be a blamed grasshopper.'

'That sounds like Dutch, an' the other feller is Post Adams. I'd know that squeak of his anywheres,' commented Snap. 'Watch out—I'm agoin' to loose off.'

Two shots came in rapid response, and Green promptly drove a bullet into the smoke of the left-hand sniper, drawing forth further curses, and an anxious query from the other man. 'Yu ain't let him get yu again, have yu?'

'Him?' snorted the wounded man. 'Him? There's two of him —them shots come from twenty yards apart. Come over an' tie up my arm, an' don't talk like a damned idjut.'
'Pears like I'm makin' Mr. Dutch uncomfortable,' Green grinned. 'He's a complainin' feller, ain't he?'

'He'll be quiet enough if I get a fair squint at him,' was the grim reply. 'Betcha they fade.'
Fifteen minutes passed, and nothing happened. Then Snap fired, out no shot came in return. They waited awhile, lying motionless in their places, and then Snap shot again.
'They've flitted,' he said, and stood up, his rifle ready, and his eyes watching for a movement across the valley. But he saw nothing and, satisfied that the enemy had retreated, he walked coolly down to the trail below and retrieved his hat, in the crown of which were a couple of bullet-holes.
'Plenty ventilation in that lid now,' he remarked, as he donned the damaged article. 'But that's all to the good for a hotheaded guy like me.' He achieved the nearest thing he could to a smile and turned to his companion. 'I'm thankin' yu,' he said quietly.
'Shucks! No need for that, Snap,' returned Green. 'What have them fellers got against yu?'
The gunman shook his head. 'I ain't sayin' a word but this: yu can count on me to the limit,' he said, and held out his hand. Green realised that he had made a useful friend.
'Thank yu,' he said simply.

They mounted and rode back to the ranch in silence. From time to time Green looked at the little man beside him. What a lot he could clear up if he would only speak. But the puncher knew that he would not speak—even after the cowardly attempt on his life—and respected him for his loyalty to his late confederates. For, of course, Green surmised that Snap had been one of the gang operating against the ranch, and that he had, for some reason, quarrelled with the others and quitted.
Supper was in progress when they reached the bunkhouse, and Green, entering behind his companion, watched the foreman's face, and saw first the slight start of surprise, and then the contemptuous smile. Snap evidently also observed them.

'Things is shore livenin' up in this neck o' the woods,' he remarked casually to the room in general as he took his seat. 'A pair o' them Double X fellers tried to bush-whack me in The Gut this afternoon.'
'Yu don't say! Who was they?' asked Simple.
'Post Adams an' Dutch,' replied Lunt.
'How'd yu know? Did yu see 'em?' queried Rattler.
'Heard 'em,' said Lunt laconically. 'Ventilated Dutch some, I reckon. One of 'em spoilt my lid, damn him!'
'Good for yu,' commented Dirty. 'What they pickin' on yu for, Snap?'

The gunman looked the foreman full in the face. 'Orders, I reckon,' he said coolly. 'They ain't neither of 'em got guts enough to put up a play like that on their own.'
'The Double X is gettin' too brash,' growled Dirty. 'A lesson is about due.'
'None o' that talk here, Dirty,' cut in the foreman. 'We got enough on our hands without a range war. Snap can fight his own battles.'
'Shore, an' he can have my help any time he wants it against ambushin' coyotes,' retorted the belligerent one.

The meal over, Green drifted out to the corral, climbed the rail and sat there smoking. There was no moon, but the sky was like a dome of velvet strewn with diamonds. A light wind was

blowing from the mountains, bringing a tang of the pine forests. From the bunkhouse came the murmur of voices, soft and blurred, broken by an occasional laugh. Behind him the horses moved slowly as they cropped the grass. It all seemed peaceful, and yet, in the midst of it, robbery and murder were being planned and carried out. He looked towards the lighted windows of the ranch, and found himself wondering what Noreen was doing. He did not see a shadow slide along the corral fence.

'Stick 'em up,' growled a voice, and as he instinctively complied he looked into the barrel of a six-shooter, behind which was the laughing face of Larry. 'Say, yo-re easy, ain't yu?' added that satisfied young man.

'Shore,' replied Green, slipping his left heel from the corral bar over which it was hooked. Like a striking snake, his toe shot out and kicked the loosely-held weapon into the air. Then, with a flying leap, Green landed full on the other and they went to the ground together, Larry underneath.

'Shore,' Green repeated. 'I'm easy—roused,' and proceeded to enthusiastically push his friend's face into the soft dust. 'Let up, yu—yu catamount,' spluttered a choking voice. 'I've said "Uncle"—said it four times. Yu aimin' to bust my back, as well as my fingers?'

Thus adjured, Green allowed him to rise, and having brushed the dust from his own person, performed the same kindly office for his friend with an energy which elicited another protest.

'Aw right, don't yu trouble, feller,' Larry said. 'I ain't no carpet. What yu usin'—a fence-rail?'

'Only my hand,' came the reply.

'Only yore hand,' snorted Larry. 'Try the rail next time—I'd ruther.' He found his gun, rolled and lighted a cigarette, and took up a position on the corral fence. 'For a busted nickel I wouldn't tell yu any news,' he announced.

Green climbed up beside him. 'Spill it,' he urged, 'or Uncle will have to argue with yu some more.'

Larry moved a little further away. 'I've solved the mystery o' the rustlin',' he began solemnly.

'The leaves is doin' it—every time the wind blows.' He dodged a back-handed blow which would have sent him into the corral, and added, 'An' yu've been ridin' with the Pretty Lady. I'm agoin' to call yu "Don" in future—short for Don Juan, see?'

'Quit yore foolin'; it's blame near time yu grew up,' retorted the other. 'I don't care a cuss what yu call me, but I'd like to hear how yu knew about'—he hesitated—'the Pretty Lady.'

'Rattler told me, an' all the others. He's shore doin' his damndest to make yu popular.'

Green was silent—thinking. He felt that he could fully trust this boy for whom he had conceived a liking at their first meeting. They had become friends since then, and under their bickering and banter was a sincere affection—though neither of them would have called it that. He soon made his decision.

'I got somethin' to tell yu,' he said.

'Speak on, Big Chief Cat o' the Mountains; I'm all ears,' Larry responded.

'Damned if yu ain't too, pretty near,' grinned Green. 'Well, never yu mind; slant them long listeners o' yores this way, an' don't interrupt.'

In a low voice he proceeded to relate the humiliation of Snub, which was as yet news at the ranch!

Blaynes had heard of it from the gambler, but for once had exercised discretion about the stranger, and kept the knowledge to himself, and none of the Y Z outfit had visited the town save Snap, who did not chatter. Larry punctuated the recital with profane expressions of delight. When Green went on to recite the rescue of Noreen, the boy fell silent. The story ended—and told, as it was, in the baldest way, it did not take long—he said softly: 'Yu shore

have the luck. I'm speakin' for the job of foreman, early an' prompt.'

'What fool idea yu got in yore head now?' asked his friend. 'Well,' replied Larry, 'Ain't that the way it allus goes in the story-books? The han'some hero dashes out o' the blazin' ruins, bearin' the slender form o' the heroine, with the tears streamin' down her beautiful face, an—'

'The tears'll be streamin' down yore by no means beautiful face an' yu'll be in good shape to figure as a blazin' ruin yoreself if yu don't stop talkin' drivel,' interrupted Green. 'What do yu make o' Snap bein' stood up thataway?' He went on to tell of his own share in the affair.

'Shore is an odd number,' Larry reflected. 'Wonder what they split on? Pity he won't talk; but he's square, Snap is; I allus sort o' liked him.'

'There's somethin' or somebody big behind it all,' Green said musingly. 'It ain't just a common steal of a few cattle. Trouble is, we ain't got an atom o' proof. Well, it's no good a-worryin'.'

'Not a bit,' responded Larry, and added the entirely irrelevant remark, 'Say, Don, I hope yu get her.'

'I hope yu get sense, yu chump,' drawled Green. 'Do yu s'pose a girl like that would look twice at me? 'Sides, I ain't got no time for women. When this little tangle is straightened out, I gotta job that looks like keepin' me busy for a long time.'

'If it's one that two can tackle, deal me a hand,' Larry said quickly.

'Thank yu,' said his friend, and meant it.

'Shucks!' came the ready reply. 'I can keep my eye on that foreman's job thataway. S'long. It's me for the hay.'

He slid into the gloom, leaving the older man still perched on the rail of the corral. Though he had not known it, the boy's light words had left a sting behind them. The cowpuncher's eyes turned involuntarily to the still-lighted windows of the ranch-house. Was it possible that a girl like that could ever come to care for such a man as he? The idea seemed absurd, and yet he dallied with it. The feel of her arms round his neck, though it had been necessary, and he knew she had hardly been conscious of what she was doing, remained an ever-present memory. The picture of a settled home, with a wife, and perhaps kiddies, was a powerful temptation to one who had spent years of his life as a wanderer, and alone. But he thrust it aside with an almost savage laugh at his own folly.

'I'm gettin' soft,' he muttered. 'An' there ain't no moon neither.'

But he looked again at the ranch-house before he turned to seek his pillow.

CHAPTER IX

THE Frying Pan ranch lay to the west of the Y Z, the two ranges being separated by a narrow strip of broken country difficult to cross. But there were one or two gaps in the barrier in the shape of level stretches, one of them not far from the cabin where Bud had been done to death. For years the desirability of fencing these openings had been admitted by both owners, but nothing had been done, though the line-riders cursed the omission almost daily.

The Frying Pan outfit had been busy for a week or more rounding up a herd to be trail-driven east to the nearest railway point of shipment. The result of their efforts, some five hundred head of cattle, was now gathered on an expanse of good grass only a few miles from the ranch-house, awaiting the final selection. It was a still, dark night, only a few stars were visible, and the animals were settling down contentedly. A lone rider, moving spectral-like on the outskirts of the herd, was intoning monotonously an utterly unprintable ballad. Suddenly came the howl of a coyote, and the rider pulled up and peered into the darkness. The sound seemed to come from ahead of him; a moment later came an answering cry which appeared to emanate from behind him.

'Funny,' he muttered. 'Must be a couple of 'em : even a coyote couldn't cover the ground in time. Them sweet accents didn't sound just alike neither. Gimme half a chance, yu prowlin' thieves, an' I'll hang yore grey hides on the fence.'

He loosened his pistol in the holster and rode slowly on. Presently the blurred, indistinct mass of another horseman loomed up in the darkness, and the cowboy's right hand instinctively went to his gun.

'That yu, Lucky?' he asked, and when no answer came, he added, 'What's eatin' yu? Ain't afraid yu'll catch cold in yore insides if yu open that hole in yore face, are yu?'

A low chuckle came in response and the blur waved an arm. A faint swish followed, and ere the cowboy could dodge the danger a loop dropped over his shoulders and he was yanked suddenly from his saddle. Even in the act of falling, however, he snatched out his gun and fired two rapid shots into the air. A second later a crashing blow from a pistol-barrel laid him senseless. Other riders instantly appeared out of the gloom.

'Grit a move on,' said one of them. 'Cut out as many as we can handle an' start the rest in the other direction. We gotta hustle; we shall have the whole darn crowd here soon, now this blamed fool has given the signal,' and he kicked the unconscious boy viciously in the ribs.

With the expertness of men who knew their job the raiders got to work. A portion of the now uneasy herd was separated from the main bunch and driven in a north-easterly direction. It does not take much to turn a herd of contented cattle into a torrent of mad, unreasoning fear, a fact the rustlers were fully aware of. No sooner were the stolen beasts sufficiently far away than two of the riders returned, and with shouts and flapping saddle-blankets soon stampeded the already scared herd, sending it thundering blindly to the shout. They had barely accomplished this when madly pounding hoofs brought another horseman on the scene.

'Charlie, where in 'ell are yu?' he called. 'I heard yore signal. What's up?'

Then he suddenly grasped that something was wrong, and with an oath, he jerked out his gun and fired. The spit of flame stabbed the darkness, and one of the raiders cursed. His companion, dropping his blanket, appeared to lift something from his saddle and raise his arm. Then came a peculiar twang, and the cowboy gasped and almost fell from his horse. But the instinct of a man who spends nearly all his waking hours in the saddle came to his aid, and gripping with weakening knees, he whirled the pony and headed for the ranch.

'He won't never make it,' said one of the raiders. 'Did he git yu?'

'Creased my shoulder, blast him ! An' it's bleedin' like blazers, but it can wait; we gotta punch the breeze. C'mon.'

Spurring their mounts in the direction taken by the rest of the band, they vanished in the night.

Meanwhile the gallant little cow-pony, with its almost senseless burden, made unswervingly for home, and as though it understood the need for haste, never slackened speed until it slid to a stop in front of the bunkhouse door. One of those within, hearing the patter of hoof-beats, came out to see who was arriving. His shout brought the others. The senseless form, drooping over the saddlehorn, was lifted down, carried into the bunkhouse and laid on a bench. One of the men raced to fetch the boss.

'Why, it's Lucky, an' he's got an arrow through his shoulder,' cried one. 'What in 'ell's doin'?' Leeming, the owner of the Frying Pan, hurried in. Who is it, an' what's the trouble?' he asked. 'It's Lomas, an' it shore looks as if there's trouble a-plenty,' replied Dirk Iddon, his foreman, who was bending over the wounded man.

Cutting away the shirt and vest, he laid bare the wound, and disclosed the arrow buried to the feathered end in the white flesh, with the vicious barbed point protruding from the back.

'That's a 'Pache war-shaft,' he commented.

With deft tenderness, he snapped the shaft just below the feathers and turning the hurt man on

his side, gripped the head of the arrow and drew it gently from the wound, which was then sponged and bandaged with care and thoroughness which would not have discredited a professional healer. Dirk had doctored many hurts, and some community lost a good physician when he ran wild and drifted to the West.

'He's shore livin' up to his name, Lucky is,' remarked he, regarding his handiwork with satisfaction. 'Couple o' inches lower down an' it would've been through the lung. As it is, he'll be as good as new in two-three weeks. How the 'ell he stayed on that hoss beats me.'

The sick man's eyes fluttered and opened; he made an effort to sit up, only to sink back wearily. Dirk handed him a tot of whisky, holding it to his lips.

'Tell us what happened, Lucky, if yu can,' he said.

The strong, raw spirin, and the sound of the familiar voice of his foreman brought the cowboy back to consciousness, and gave him strength to speak.

'Injuns,' he said. 'Stampeded the herd. They musta got old Charlie. I heard shootin' an' bumped right into 'em; think I nicked one.'

He sank back exhausted, oblivious to the tumult his information had aroused. Every man was furious, but the anger of Job Leeming exceeded them all. A shortish, choleric man, his violent outbursts of temper had made 'the impatience of Job' a byword in the district. For the rest he was a square dealer and a good employer. At the moment he was almost beside himself.

'Jump to it, boys,' he cried. 'Hosses an' guns for all o' yu. Cook—where's than blasted cook? Oh, here yu are. Why in 'ell don't yu come when I call yu? Rustle some grub, pronto, an' then look after Lomas. We'll get these murderin' dogs if we have to foller 'em to the Pit.'

'Shore we'll get 'em,' said Dirk. 'We'll bring enough scalps to make Lucky a ha'r bridle.'

In less than fifteen minutes a dozen men were racing for the spot where the herd had been.

They soon reached it, and scattered to search for the missing cowboy. It was Dirk who happened upon the huddled, prostrate form; at his call, Leeming and the others came scampering up. The foreman knelt and examined the injured man, his fingers encountering a sticky smear of blood across the forehead.

'Show a light, somebody,' he said.

The flame of several manches revealed the extent of the damage.

'Roped him an' knocked him cold with a gun,' stated Dirk. 'He ain't hurt bad—his head must be made o' granite, I reckon. I'll do what I can.'

Under his ministrations the patient came to, and in a faltering voice confirmed the foreman's theory of what had taken place. 'I thought the blamed sky had dropped on me,' he said. 'I shore saw all the stars there is.'

Held in the saddle by another of the outfit, he was also despatched to the care of Cookie at the ranch-house, and having attended to the wants of his wounded, Leeming now felt that he was at liberty to take up his own affairs. Here a difficulty presented itself. Even in the faint light of the early dawn it was possible to see what had happened, and Dirk, who had been carefully scanning the tracks, summed up the situation.

'They've gone nor-east with a bunch o' cattle, headin' for Big Chief, an' they stampeded the rest o' the herd in the opposite direction. Chances is, they've left four times as many as they lifted. What yu aim to do about it?'

'We'll have to split,' Leeming said. 'Yu take five o' the boys an' follow the 'Paches; the rest of us will round up the herd. I'd come with yu, but we can't both leave the ranch, an' yo're too darned good at readin' sign to leave behind. How many do yu figure they got?'

'Tidy bunch—near a hundred, I guess,' Dirk replied. 'Means one thing—they'll travel all the slower with that lot; we oughtta come up with 'em, spite o' the start they got.'

'Shoot every one o' the durn copper-coloured thieves when yu do,' snorted the other, adding a string of lurid oaths as he turned away to commence the wearisome task of collecting the scattered herd. To describe him as an angry man would be putting it very mildly indeed. At least a week's work destroyed in a single night, and all to be done again, to say nothing of the probable loss of about five-score valuable beasts; for though he would not admit it even to himself, Job had little hope that his steers would be recovered. He knew but too well the wildness of the country, and the many hiding-places it afforded a cunning predator. That this raid, like the one on his neighbour, was the work of Indians, he did not doubt for an instant, and with the white man's instinctive hatred for the redskin, his resentment was the greater.

Late on the afternoon of the following day the foreman of the Y Z strode into the bunkhouse with a look of malicious triumph on his face.

'Green, the Old Man wants to see yu, pronto,' he said. 'The Injuns have got away with a big steal o' Frying Pan cows, an' "Old Impatience" is up there a-raisin' Cain.'

If he expected the cowpuncher to ask for any details he was disappointed; Green simply nodded and went out. At the ranch-house he found Simon and Leeming in the big living-room, the latter pacing up and down, and evidently in a state of eruption. Simon plunged at once into the business.

'Green,' he said. 'Meet Mr. Leeming, owner of the Frying Pan. Yu heard he's been raided?' 'Blaynes just said somethin' about it; I ain't got no particulars,' replied the puncher, acknowledging the introduction by a nod at the visitor.

'Night before last it happened. Laid out two o' my outfit, an' got away with about a hundred head,' snapped Leeming. 'What yu gotta say about it?'

'Tough luck,' said Green, quietly.

'Tough luck?' vociferated Leeming angrily. 'Tough luck? That's a helluva note, ain't it? An' yo're the feller that's agoin' to stop the rustlin', huh? Why, it's been worse'n ever since yu took a hand. Seems to me yu ain't no more use than a busted leg.' -

The cowpuncher's face flushed through the tan, his jaws clenched, and his eyes narrowed as he listened to this tirade. Leeming, still stamping up and down the room, had completely lost control of himself, but the object of his abuse was outwardly calm.

'Yu payin' any o' my wages?' he asked.

Like a shot from a gun the simple question, which put him utterly in the wrong, knocked the irate cattleman off his balance. But he was in too vile a temper to recognise this. 'What's that gotta do with it?' he stormed.

'Everythin',' replied the puncher coolly. 'There's only one man who has the right to bawl me out if I don't do my work an' that's the man who pays me.'

The words were spoken evenly and without a trace of passion, but there was a deadly meaning in the low voice. Leeming stopped his perambulations and looked at him.

'Well, I'm damned if yu ain't got yore nerve,' he said. 'For two bits I'd...'

Green slipped his hand into his pocket, produced the coins named and laid them on the table without a word. No challenge could have been more plainly given. Leeming's face became suffused with blood, but before he could speak, Old Simon interposed:

'That's enough,' he said brusquely. 'Job, yu gotta remember that yu are in my house, an' speakin' no one o' my outfit, an' I won't stand for it nor ask him to. If yu don't ride that temper o' yores it's goin' to thow yu bad one o' these days.'

For a moment the angry man looked madder than ever and then all at once his face changed and he laughed aloud. 'Sorry, Simon,' he said. 'Yo're right. I'm a plain damn fool to go off the handle like this. No offence meant to either o' yu. It's my beast of a temper—can't help it—

always had it—my old folks used to say that I cussed my nurse before I had any teeth. The Frying Pan boys understand—they just let me shoot off my mouth, an' laugh behind my back, damn rascals.' He looked at Green. 'No hard feelin's, I hope?'

'None here,' replied the puncher, with a smile.

And indeed, the change about was so sudden and complete that it could not be otherwise than amusing. Yet one could sense that it was not in any way due to cowardice; Leeming had plenty of pluck and would have pulled his gun and shot it out with the cowboy just as cheerfully as he apologised, and Green understood this, and respected the owner of the Frying Pan the more for it.

'Well, that's all right,' said Simon, obviously relieved at the way things had come out. 'Tell him about it, Job.'

Leeming told the story of the raid and Green listened in silence until he had finished. Then came a question.

'Yu say they headed north-east for Big Chief? Then they must 'a crossed the Y Z near the line-house.' He turned to Simon. 'Do yu happen to know which of our boys were there night before last?'

'I asked Blaynes the same thing, an' he said Durran an' Nigger—two experienced men,' he explained to Leeming. 'I've met 'em,' said Job in a non-committal tone.

'An' yore foreman lost the trail on Sandy Parlour?' pursued the cowpuncher.

'Yes, an' he's a good trailer too, but a desert an' Injuns is a strong combination.'

'Yu can cut out the redskins—they ain't nothin' to do with yore losin' cattle.'

'But my boys saw 'em, an' that arrow through Lucky's shoulder ain't no dream,' protested the cattleman.

'Green reckons it's whites pretendin' to be Injuns to razzle-dazzle us,' explained Simon. 'It shore would be an easy play to make.'

'I ain't reckonin', I know it's so,' the puncher said, 'but I'm not advertisin' it.'

'Shore,' agreed Leeming. 'Anythin' else yu can tell us?'

The other shook his head. 'Can't prove nothin',' he said. 'Soon as I've got the goods I'll put my cards on the table. All I'm shore of at present is that it ain't just a small gang liftin' a few cows now an' then; they are organised, and there's a big man somewhere pullin' the strings.'

'What makes yu think that?' asked Simon.

'Just one or two things I happened to overhear,' was the reply. 'Yu shore o' yore outfit?'

The question was addressed to the owner of the Frying Pan, and he was quick to answer it.

'I'll go bail for every one,' he said confidently. 'Are yu suggestin' ?'

'I'm only askin',' replied Green. 'I don't know any of 'em, an' even in the best o' ropes there may be a weak strand. What's yore opinion o' Dexter, of the Double X?'

'Don't like him—dunno why, but I don't,' was the blunt reply. 'Yu got anythin' on him?'

'No,' Green had to confess, 'but it was some of his men hung me over the cliff—yu heard o' that—joke, I reckon?'

'Shore, an' o' the one yu played on Snub in return,' laughed Leeming. 'Silas told me he never saw a man imitate a chunk o' rock as well as Snub did while yu was shavin' his upper lip for him.'

'He did stand awful still, for a fact,' responded the puncher, a twinkle of devilment in his eyes at the memory. 'Two more o' that outfit bush-whacked Lunt.'

This was news to the Frying Pan owner. 'The hell they did?' he said. 'They musta felt pretty shore o' gettin' him; Snap's hands are jest about a shade quicker'n my temper, an' I can't say more than that. What are they after him for?'

'I dunno, but it looks like some of us ain't wanted around here,' Green replied. 'Me, I'm aimin' to stay, just the same.' When he had gone, Simon turned to his visitor and said, 'How

does he strike yu?"

'Well, I'd sooner have him with than against me,' was Job's verdict. 'Know anythin' about him?'

'Not a darn thing,' said Simon. 'Barton fetched him along after he'd beat up Poker Pete most to death. Said he was huntin' a job. He certainly is wise to his work, but I can't place him. Blaynes thinks he might be in with the rustlers.'

'Which just means that yore foreman don't like him,' said Leeming shrewdly.

'And who is it that our respected foreman does not approve of?' asked a fresh young voice.

'Hello, Miss Norry,' cried Job heartily, turning round to shake hands with the girl. She had just come in from a ride, and her flushed cheeks, dancing eyes, and trim figure were good to look upon. 'Hang me if yu don't get prettier every time I see yu. When are yu comin' to take charge at the Frying Pan, eh?'

It was an old joke between them. Leeming, a confirmed bachelor, always protested that he was so solely on account of Noreen.

'Not until I'm no longer wanted at the Y Z,' she laughed and added saucily, 'I should be afraid of your dreadful temper.' 'I've lost it, Norry,' Leeming said.

'What, again?' retorted the girl merrily, and then, 'But you haven't answered my question.'

'We were talkin' o' the new hand, Green,' Job explained. 'What's yore opinion of him?'

'Since he came to my help when I was in danger, I am naturally prejudiced,' the girl replied soberly. 'I think he's a good man. And now, if you two have done talking secrets, I expect supper is about ready. As Cookie says down at the bunkhouse, "Come an' git it."'

CHAPTER X

VISITORS to Hatchett's Folly were rare and therefore mostly welcome; visitors with plenty of money to spend were rarer still and correspondingly more welcome. So that when Mr. Joe Tarman and his friend and companion, Mr. Seth Laban, rode in, they had no cause to complain of their reception. The first-named, in fact, would have been well received anywhere, for he bore every appearance of prosperity, and he radiated with generosity, thus capturing every loafer in the town at a blow.

He was a big fellow, standing over six feet, with a broad, well-muscled frame denoting strength above the average even for men of his height, and he was still on the right side of forty. His hair, eyebrows, and carefully-trimmed beard were deep black and gave him a striking appearance. A captious critic might have suggested that the face was too fleshy and the rather small eyes too close together, but ninety-nine women out of every hundred would have voted Joe Tarman a very handsome man.

In this he differed entirely from his companion; Seth Laban could have no such pretensions. He was a slight man of between forty and fifty, with a pronounced stoop which made him appear shorter than he really was. He had a long nose, receding forehead and chin, and small eyes, a combination which produced a rodent-like impression. Believers in the Buddhist theory of the transmigration of souls have said that his previous existence must have been that of a rat, while others, of a less charitable nature, might have held that he was still a rat, and would not have been too wide of the mark at that.

This curiously assorted couple, having installed themselves at the hotel, at once gravitated to the Folly, followed by a number of the inhabitants. Tarman, having introduced himself and his companion to the bartender, at once struck the right note by ordering drinks for the crowd. He made no secret of his object in coming to Hatchett's.

'Stayin' long?' asked Silas.

'All depends,' said the big man. 'I'm just havin' a look around. Heard this was good cattle country, an' came along. Cows is where I live; I've handled a few in my time, eh, Seth?'

'I reckon,' replied Laban, following the words with the disruption of his features which did duty with him as a smile. 'It's good cattle-land all right, but pretty well covered,' returned Silas. 'I ain't heard as any o' the owners want to sell.' 'They'd better sell while the sellin's good; they won't have nothin' left soon,' sniggered one of the crowd.

'How comes that?' asked the visitor.

'Rustlers,' was the laconic answer.

Tarman laughed. 'I've handled a lot o' rustlers in my time too, eh, Seth?'

'I reckon,' came the reply, with the same parody of smile.

'I've got a shore cure for rustlin',' the big man went on. 'Yes, gents, a shore cure—never known it to fail; a rope an' a branch—that's a combination that'll bean Mr Rustler every time.'

'Yu gotta catch 'em first,' said the man who had spoken before. 'Injuns is tricky, an' so is the blame country round here.' 'I got no use for Injuns, not noways,' chimed in another. 'Well, I wouldn't go so far as that,' smiled Tarman. 'There's been times when I've found 'em useful, eh, Seth?'

'I reckon,' came the inevitable reply.

The discussion became general but Tarman now took little part in it; he was looking through the open door of the saloon, intent on something taking place on the far side of the dusty street. He saw a girl sitting her pony easily, cowboy fashion, that is, almost standing in the stirrups. In her neat shirt-waist, divided skirt, trim high boots, and soft sombrero looped up at one side she was, in Western idiom, 'easy to look at.' She was talking to a tall cowboy who stood beside her, hat in hand, with the reins of his mount—a magnificent roan—looped over his arm. Already Tarman had decided that he wanted both the girl and the horse.

'Who's the lady?' he asked of Silas, nodding his head towards the street.

Norry Petter, daughter of Old Simon of the Y Z,' replied the barman. 'Feller she's talkin' to is one o' the outfit—name o' Green—ain't been about here long.'

The big man's features betrayed no particular interest in the information. 'She's a good-looker,' he said. But his eyes could not keep away from the door-opening.

Meanwhile the pair outside continued their conversation, quite unconscious of the interest being taken in them. Noreen had not known that the puncher was in town until she saw him standing by the roan opposite the saloon. For a moment she contemplated riding past with just a nod of recognition, and then, with a little frown of determination, she reined in and smiled a greeting. Green, who had not failed to note the hesitation, removed his hat and grinned quizzically.

'Why didn't you?' he asked.

'Why didn't I what?' she parried, though she knew what he meant.

'Ride past without seein' me,' he said.

The girl flushed. 'I never dreamt of doing that,' she protested. 'At first I wasn't going to stop because...' She paused, and then added, 'Some sneak saw us the day you carried me up the cliff, and told Daddy we'd been riding together; he was rather upset.'

'Didn't like the idea o' yu bein' too friendly with a common cowboy, I s'pose,' Green said, with a perceptible tinge of bitterness in his tone.

'No, it wasn't that,' she said quickly. 'Why, Daddy was a cowboy once himself, and what he said applied to all the outfit.'

'An' I'm bettin' that he pointed out that I ain't handed in any account o' my life an' adventures,' Green hazarded gravely, but with twinkling eyes.

The girl laughed gaily, glad that the hurt had passed. 'He did suggest that we don't know much about you,' she admitted. 'Of course, he didn't know that you had come to my rescue

again.'

'An' I don't want that he should; I'm askin' yu to forget it too,' said the puncher quickly. Will yu?'

She shook her head. 'I don't forget services,' she replied. 'Some day I shall tell him, and he won't forget it either. Dear old Daddy, he's only thinking of me and you mustn't "hold it against him," as Larry would say.'

'Yore father is dead right,' the man said, and there was a look in his eyes she had never seen there before, which quickened her pulses and made her turn her head away. To hide her confusion, she leant forward and stroked the roan's neck with her gloved hand.

'Isn't he a beauty?' she said. 'I hope you haven't taken all the spirit out of him.'

'Oh, he still gets notions,' laughed the puncher. 'He knows me an' we get along fine, but I doubt if anyone else could ride him. Larry tried the other day an' didn't last a minute; he's a good horseman, too.'

At this point the conversation was interrupted. Across from the door of the saloon came Tarman, accompanied by Rayne, the keeper of the hotel, whom Noreen had known for years. He greeted her with a wave of the hand.

'Mornin', Miss Norry,' he said. 'Want yu to meet Mr. Joseph Tarman, a visitor to our litlne town.'

The girl held out her hand frankly and the big man bowed over it with rather a flourish, and said: 'I'm askin' yu to excuse my buttin' in like this, Miss Noreen, but when yu were pointed out to me I felt I had to make acquaintance as quickly as possible. I'm hopin' to pay yore father a visin right soon.'

His bold eyes took in every detail of her as she sat there, and her first impression was one of revolt against the possessive air he radiated.

'My father, I am sure, will be pleased to see you,' she said. 'Not so pleased as I'll be,' Tarman responded heartily. 'An' the first thing I'm goin' no ask him is what price he'll take for that roan there which I see carries his brand, an' which—with one exception—has taken my fancy more than anythin' I ever set eyes on.'

He smiled broadly as he spoke, showing his strong white teeth, and the girl, country-bred as she was, could not fail to understand that he was paying her what he considered to be a compliment.

'That horse is not my father's property although it bears our brand,' she said coldly. 'In belongs to this gentleman.'

She indicated Green, who was quietly waiting until the interrupted conversation could be resumed. Tarman turned a somewhat insolent gaze upon the cowboy.

'Give yu a hundred dollars for the hoss,' he said.

'No,' was the curt reply.

Two hundred,' and when the cowboy shook his head, 'Three hundred.'

Several of the onlookers gasped, and gazed enviously upon the owner of the coveted animal.

In a land where even good horseflesh was cheap, the price offered was excessive. 'Cripes!

Wish I owned that hoss,' murmured one thirsty soul, visioning the number of drinks to be obtained for three hundred dollars. 'Betcha a dollar he takes it.' His neighbour had been watching the cowboy closely. 'Take yu,' he said instantly. He had but spoken when Green looked the would-be purchaser calmly in the face, and said:

'The hoss is not for sale.'

For a moment Tarman was nonplussed; he had felt confident that a sum more than equal to seven months' pay would tempt a cowhand to part with even a favourite mount: But he would

not give in. It was his boast that he always got what he went after, and realising that mere money would not do it, he tried something else.

'See here,' he said. 'Cowboys is reckoned to be good sports. Now I'll put up four hundred 'gainst the hoss an' play yu for him—any game yu like. What about it?'

'I ain't playin' for nor sellin' the hoss,' Green replied, 'but'—and his voice had a rasp in it as he marked the growing sneer on the other's lips—'I'll give him to yu if yu can stay on him for five minutes by the clock.'

From the spectators of the scene came a murmur of applause, born of the instinctive loyalty for one's home town which remains in a man after he has lost almost everything else. The stranger might be all that he seemed, but public favour was, for the moment anyway, on the side of the cowboy. He had met the challenge with a sporting offer which not only promised excitement but reflected credit upon the community at large. Bets were bandied about at once, for the reputation of the roan was known, and the offer was one the visitor could hardly refuse. He had no intention of doing so.

'I'll go yu,' he laughed, 'but as I don't take gifts from strangers, if I win—an' I've never seen anythin' on four legs that I couldn't ride—yu must accept the price I offered, three hundred for the hoss.'

'As yu like,' said the puncher indifferently.

Immediately the crowd, which now included nearly every male inhabitant, surged back to the sidewalks and occupied the doorways, leaving the street empty save for the horse, Green, who held it, and the newcomer. The fortunate few who possessed watches got them out in readiness to time the contest; those with money were eagerly endeavouring to place bets.

'Think yore friend'll make it?' asked one of Laban.

'I reckon,' was the stolid reply, and the questioner turned away in disgust, murmuring, 'Bloomin' parrot, on'y two words he knows. Must be one o' them ready reckoners I've heard about.'

The big man wasted no time. Directly the street was clear he stepped forward, took the reins from Green, and with a lightness not to be looked for in so heavy a man, sprang into the saddle and settled his feet in the stirrups. For perhaps five seconds the animal stood perfectly still, and then, with a shrill scream of rage, it instantly became a maelstrom of activity. Head down, it leapt into the air a dozen times with incredible rapidity, landing on legs as sniff as steel rods, and never allowing the rider an instant to recover from one shock before the next came. It was straightforward bucking, with no particular novelty, but the speed made it terrible.

'My Gawd! can't he buck though?' breathed one of the awed spectators. 'Ten to one on the hoss.' Nobody nook up the wager. But Tarman hung on, his eyes glazing, his face white as death, and a trickle of blood oozing from his clamped lips. Jarred almost into insensibility by the violence of the incessant jolts, he rocked in the saddle, his head jerking to and fro as though his neck were already broken. That he had pluck as well as strength was obvious.

There could be only one end, however, and it came soon. Again the frantic animal shot from the ground, but this time its body curved curiously in the air as it came down, upsetting the rider's already precarious balance and causing him to sway sideways. Then as the brute's forefeet landed, its hindquarters rose suddenly, and Tarman flew out of the saddle like a snone from a sling, to sprawl, face downwards, in the dust of the street.

'Seventy-five seconds,' Green said quietly, as he slipped his watch back into his pocket and sprang forward to grip the reins of the horse, which was now standing still, with heaving flanks and trembling limbs.

Seth ran to assist his friend, only to be thrust aside with a curse as Tarman scrambled to his

feet. The man was transformed; in the place of the jovial good fellowship, his face, dust and blood-smeared, was now that of a fiend. Cursing, he stood there, swaying on his legs and clawing for the gun which had swung round behind him. His purpose was plain; he intended to shoot the horse.

'Don't yu,' drawled a quiet voice, and he looked into the muzzle of the cowboy's gun. With a tremendous effort he got control of himself again, but anger still flamed within him. 'I'll give you five hundred dollars for that brute, if it's only to break ins damned neck,' he cried.

'Yu couldn't buy him with all yu got,' was the contemptuous answer. 'Yu had yore chance.'

Without another glance at the discomfited man he swung himself carelessly into the saddle, cuffed the horse playfully when it half-heartedly tried to throw him out again, and rode down the street.

Tarman looked for the girl but she had gone, though he knew she had witnessed his defeat, a fact which contributed not a little to his unfortunate display of temper. This was now over, and as he brushed the dust from his clothes, he said, with a rueful grin: 'Well, folks, it ain't often that Joe Tarman loses his wool but I've shore got to own up to it to-day. That hoss certainly got me goin'. First time I ever was piled an' I've rid some bad ones too, but that roan's a holy terror. Say, I reckon I've swallowed pretty near an acre o' dust; what about irrigatin', an' mebbe a little game o' some sort?'

The proposal was received with acclamation of a thirsty crowd, and Poker Pete happening along very opportunely, was presented to Mr. Tarman and the little game was soon in progress. The big man lost about a hundred dollars at poker, most of it to the gambler, and with great good humour, insisted on celebrating his second defeat of the day by setting up drinks for all, an act which proclaimed him a thorough sport and soundly established his popularity. But there were those who remembered his expression when he rose from the dusty street, and were of opinion that despite his geniality the newcomer was not one to take liberties with.

Noreen rode home with much to think of. At the commencement of the scene between the visitor and the cowpuncher she had ridden a little distance away, but could not resist the temptation to turn and watch. She saw Green choose the western trail out of town, and guessed that it was deliberately done to save her from further embarrassment; while she appreciated the motive, she was conscious of a vague sense of disappointment.

Respecting Tarman she could come to no decision; he had both repelled and attracted her. Even with her small experience of the world, she recognised in him a type capable of exercising a powerful appeal to women. While he was essentially a man's man, he did not neglect the softer influences. He dressed well, and yet no one could have called him a dandy. A good tweed suit, the trousers folded neatly into the tops of his well-fitting riding-boots, a silk shirt, with a soft collar and flowing tie, and an expensive Stetson, were in marked contrast to the nondescript attire affected by most of the inhabitants of Hatchett's Folly. As to the real man himself, Noreen could only speculate, but she remembered his face as he staggered to his feet from the dust when the horse had thrown him, and shivered. No doubt the humiliation had been a cruel one, but.... She found herself wondering how the puncher would have taken a similar defeat and had to confess that she did not know; men were so different when they were angry. But somehow she felt that Green would not have wanted to kill the horse—he would have respected it for its victory. He and Tarman were different types, she decided, and pursued the thought no further.

As the girl had surmised, Green had consciously chosen the western way out of the town in order to avoid her. To be seen speaking to her in Hatchett's mattered little, for she might have been delivering a message from her father for all the passers-by knew, but to ride away in her company was a different matter after the views Old Simon had already expressed, and Green had reasons for not wishing to exasperate the ranch-owner. As soon as he was clear of the buildings he swung round and headed east, his mind busy with what had just taken place. He playfully pulled one of the roan's ears, a pleasantry to which the animal responded by trying to pitch him into a prickly thorn bush.

'Yu old pirut,' chided his master indulgently, when he had subdued the outburst. 'Don't yu know who's atop of yu? The feller who christened yu shore knew his business. Shucks! But yu hadn't oughtta turned the nice gent into a dust-plough an' mussed up his whiskers thataway.' He laughed happily as he recalled the scene. 'But, hush, he was some fierce when he got up. Yu come mighty near to passin' out that minute, Blue, if he could 'a' found his gun. An' yu come close another time, when the Pretty Lady stroked yu, yu lucky devil; one snap at her an' I'd have busted yu wide open, yu hear me, though I never seen a hoss I liked so much.' He pulled the ear again and this time there was no answering demonstration. 'Good for yu,' he said. 'We gotta stick together, for we ain't neither of us very popular around here, an' we gotta watch that chap Tarman an' the little runt that trails wint him.'

The rasp was back in his voice again as he spoke the last sentence. He knew nothing about the two visitors, had never seen either of them before, and yet at the moment his gaze clashed with that of the big man, he was conscious of a feeling of antagonism. Green had experienced the same sort of thing before and he had never been wrong; men he had trusted at sight had proved worthy, and others he had distrusted had, sooner or later, justified his doubt. He had come to believe in these intuitions. His face softened again as he remembered Noreen's smile of greeting, and that she had not 'passed him up' despite her father's wish. 'She shore has got sand to burn,' he told himself.

CHAPTER XI

Whatever else he might be, Mr. Joseph Tarman was a man of action, and when he told Noreen that he intended to visit her father 'right soon' he meant just that. So the same afternoon found him, with his diminutive companion, Seth Laban, riding the trail to the Y Z ranch. He had entirely recovered his poise.

'Mighty good move we made, comin' to this Gawd-forgotten hole, Seth,' he remarked genially, when they were clear of the town.

'I reckon,' came the stereotyped reply. 'What d'ye make o' that marshal, Tonk?'

'Oughtta be named Tank,' said Tarman, with a laugh. 'Guess Pete owns him anyway.'

Seth nodded—he never wasted breath—and his friend continued 'Plenty opportunity here, with no interference, an' good cattle country.'

'I reckon,' Seth agreed. 'An' when the railway comes... 'Shut yore damned face,' snapped the big man savagely.

'But there can't nobody hear,' expostulated the other.

'How in hell do yu know?' retorted Tarman. 'What yu gotta remember all the time is that the railway ain't never comin' near here, an' then yu won't make no slips.'

They rode in silence for a while, Seth smarting under the reproof, and Tarman deep in thought, of a pleasant nature evidently, for he was smiling again. Presently he spoke: 'That girl shore has got me goin'. I feel tempted to chuck my hand in, marry her an' settle down.'

She's the only child an' she'll have the Y Z when the old man cashes.'

The smaller man looked at him in quick alarm. 'Yu don't mean that, Joe?' he queried. 'Just when we've got everythin' fixed good. Why, yu'll be King o' the Ranges if things go right.'

Tarman laughed again. 'Bet I scared yu, Seth. No, I ain't a quitter. King o' the Ranges, eh?

Well, that shore sounds fine, an' she'll make a dandy Queen, I guess.'

'Better steer clear o' the skirts, Joe,' warned Laban. 'Yu know what Lola told yu—that yu'd split on a woman someday.'

'Bah!' sneered Tarman. 'A woman, an' a greaser at that, is liable to say anythin' when yu tell her yo're tired of her. I want the girl an' the roan hoss an' I'm agoin' to have 'em both.'

'The owner o' the hoss don't seem inclined to part with it,' said the little man, and there was something in his tone which brought the grin back to Tarman's face.

'There have been other people who had things I fancied an' didn't want to part with 'em,' he said. 'They yielded to persuasion, didn't they?'

'I reckon,' replied Seth, and smiled his smile. 'All the same, he looks a tough customer.'

'He's shore that,' admitted Tarman. 'Somehow I gotta feeling I've seen him before, but I'm damned if I can figure where it was.'

They rode in silence again, the big man deep in thought, and the smaller one watching him with cunning eyes and gloating inwardly. He could sway him—he knew the note to strike. Many men were afraid of Joe Tarman, but he, Seth Laban, though he was treated like a tame dog more than anything else, was not afraid. The big man might become King of the Ranges, but he, Seth assured himself, would be the power behind the throne.

Old Simon was sitting on the verandah when they arrived at nhe Y Z. He welcomed them heartily but not effusively, calling a boy to take their horses, and inviting them to make themselves at home. There was a twinkle in his eyes as he remarked: 'Heard about yu from my daughter.'

'Then I'm afraid yu didn't get a very flattering account,' laughed the big man. 'She saw me at an unfortunate moment.' 'Yu ain'n the first by a good many, if it's any comfort to yu,' smiled Simon.

'Only hoss that ever beat me,' rejoined Tarman. 'Fine beast too; yu oughtta got a good price for him.'

'I gave him away,' the cattleman explained. 'He was too expensive; it looked like I'd have to set up a regular hospital if the boys kept on tryin' to ride him, an' then my girl gets the fool notion she can do it—'

'Telling the story of the disobedient daughter, Daddy?' asked a bright voice behind him.

Tarman was instantly on his feet, his hand outstretched, and his dark eyes alight with admiration.

'Yu see I've wasted no time, Miss Noreen,' he said. 'Yore father has been tellin' me that we are fellow-sufferers so far as the roan is concerned.'

'I was very fortunate,' Noreen replied, as he shook hands. 'I hope you are not feeling any ill effects.'

'No damage,' smiled the other. 'Hurt my pride, o' course; no man likes to be piled, especially with a pretty girl looking on.' Then turning to his host, he added, 'That man o' yores seems to be able to handle him.'

'Reckon he's got the gift,' said the ranch-owner. 'I've met up with Injuns who could do anythin' with horses.'

'Injun blood in him, shouldn't wonder,' said Tarman casually. He was watching Noreen closely as he spoke, having, in fact, purposely cast what he knew to be an aspersion on the

cowboy to see if she would resent it. There was, however, nothing but indifference in her tone when she replied: 'I don't think so, but I believe he was brought up among Indians and horses.'

Tarman was pleased—evidently the girl was not interested in that quarter. 'Talkin' of Injuns,' he said. 'I hear they've been pesterin' yu some.'

'We've all been losin' cattle,' Simon replied, and let it go at that. He was not the man to tell all his business to a stranger. The conversation drifted from the Y Z to the country around it, and then further afield to other towns and territories. Tarman had travelled much, both East and West, and he spoke well. When he chose he could be very entertaining, and the girl found herself listening to him with an interest she had not expected to feel. Seth Laban, chewing on a cigar, spoke only when appealed to by the bigger man, but his cunning eyes missed nothing.

Down at the bunkhouse the visitors were the chief topic of conversation, and the story of what had happened in town was told over again as each member of the outfit drifted in. Dirty was the proud purveyor of the news, for happening to find himself but a few miles from Hatchett's he could not resist the temptation to ride in and take a 'smile' with Silas. That worthy was not, however, to be lured into expressing any opinion on the newcomers; they seemed likely to be good customers.

The younger men made no secret of their delight over the roan's victory; they knew nothing to the discredit of Tarman, but he was a stranger, and had, they considered, tried to 'run a blazer' on the Y Z. For the first time in its life the outlaw horse was popular on the ranch. 'I'd give a month's pay to 'a' bin there,' said Simple, regretfully, 'an' I ain't goin' to cuss that hoss no more, though he did damn near turn me inside out when I rid him.'

'When yu what?' asked Ginger sarcastically.

'Well, I stayed with him as long as yu did anyways,' defended Simple. 'Though I'm admittin' that ain't much to say.'

The foreman, who with some of the older hands had taken no part in the discussions, now looked up and said, 'By all accounts, this feller stayed in the saddle longer than any o' yu.'

'Any of us, yu mean, Rattler,' corrected Larry. 'Don't be so damn modest.'

'Awright, have it yore own way, on'y I ain't claimin' to have rid the boss at all,' retorted the foreman. 'I was goin' to say it might not pay to be too fresh about this stranger—he may be yore boss yet, if he buys the range.'

'Buyin' the range don't mean buyin' the outfit,' said Ginger.

'Me, I don't work for a feller who'd shoot a hoss because it throwed him.'

'Huh ! What's he wantta buy the range for when he can marry Miss Norry an' get it for nothin'?' asked Dirty disgustedly. 'Lo, Green.'

The owner of the roan had entered the bunkhouse just in time to hear Dirty's remark, and to catch an extraordinary expression of alarm and anger which it produced on the face of Blaynes.

'Marry hell,' the foreman exploded. 'Where'd yu hear that fine tale?'

'Didn't hear it nowhere—thought it all out for myself,' retorted Dirty. 'Why, it's as plain as yore face.'

Rattler ignored the insult and the almost general snigger which followed it; his mind was full of another problem altogether, one that promised to give him plenty to think about.

Meanwhile, Green was receiving the congratulations of his friends, and trying to answer a dozen questions at once.

'Say, Green, what would yu 'a' done if he'd shot the hoss?' inquired one.

'Sent him chasin' it,' came the quiet reply.

A sneering laugh came from Blaynes, but he said nothing, and the entry of the cook with a huge dish of fried steaks diverted the interest of all into a more personal direction. Ginger, having forked a slab of meat to his plate, added three or four potatoes, grabbed a hunk of bread and set to work like a famished man.

'Cripes ! My appetite's that keen I could shave with it,' he mumbled.

'Pity yu didn't,' said Dirty, with a meaning glance at the stubble on the other's chin.

'Would have if yu hadn't used all the soap, yu mud-heap,' retorted Ginger, at the imminent risk of choking himself. 'Shove over the sweetenin' if yu can spare any; don't yu like coffee with yore sugar?'

Dirty did not reply; he was too busy. He knew perfectly well that the man who dallied over his meal at the Y Z was liable to miss something. He was also aware that on this particular evening there was pie to follow, and he was aiming to be ready for it when it arrived, for the boys were fonder of eating pie than cookie was of making it.

The meal over, Green drifted outside, where he was soon joined by Ginger. Though usually his cheerful self, the redheaded one, since the passing of Bud, had suffered from occasional brooding spells, when no word could be got out of him.

'Yu still tellin' me not to start for the Reservation?' he said abruptly.

'I reckon I am,' Green replied. 'Know anybody round here that used one o' these?'

He produced the cigarette-maker and passed it to the cowboy, who examined it curiously, and shook his head. 'Never seen anythin' like it afore,' he said. 'Where'd yu get her?'

'Found it in the grass beside Bud,' replied Green.

'It warn't his, an' I guess an Injun wouldn't have no use for it,' said Ginger. 'What's yore idea?'

'I'm tellin' yu, but yu gotta keep it all behind yore teeth,' Green said, and proceeded to explain his theory as to the identity of the rustlers. 'Now,' he added, 'I asked Higgs, the storekeeper, if he sold contraptions o' this kind an' he said he never had. That was a bit ago. I was in his place this mornin' buyin' the makin's, an' he told me he'd had an inquiry for a cigarette-makin' machine, feller called Mex, who rides for Dexter. Know anythin' about him?'

Ginger swore luridly between his clenched teeth and his face hardened. 'That dirty coyote,' he said. 'Funny, but I thought of him when we found Bud, but I couldn't connect him up nohow. Him an' Bud had a little argument 'bout three months ago, an' Bud beat him no the draw an' whanged him over the head with his gun 'stead o' beefin' him proper. He claims to be white, but I reckon he's nthree parts Greaser an' the other part dog. He's lived in the East—I've heard him braggin' about it—an' he likely picked up that affair there. Me, I'm ridin' into town now; he may be there.'

'I'll go along,' Green said.

The red-headed puncher slipped the tell-tale little machine into the pocket of his chaps and led the way to the corral. It did not take long to saddle the horses, and soon they were trotting side by side along the trail to the town. All the youth had gone out of Ginger's face, which was set with determination. Green did not talk. He knew that a tragedy impended but he would not lift a finger to prevent it; he had come merely to see that his friend got fair play. They had not gone more than a mile when they heard the thud of hoofs from behind, and in a moment another rider joined them. It was Snap.

'Yu fellers mind if I trail along to town with yu?' he asked. 'I gotta see a man about a dog. What's takin' yu in, Ginger?'

'I want to see a dog about a man,' the red-head replied grimly, and there was no smile on his

lips.

The gunman made no comment and the ride was continued in silence. When they reached the town, the evening festivities were in full swing. From the dance-hall next to the hotel came the wail of a fiddle, and outside the Folly at least a dozen ponies were hitched, several bearing the Double X brand. The three men added theirs to the number and walked into the saloon.

Green led the way to the bar, and returning the greeting of Silas, ordered a round of drinks. Then he took a general survey of the room. It was fairly full; a few men were lounging against the bar, but the majority of those present were grouped around the several tables at which cards were being played. At one of these Tarman, his satellite Laban, Poker Pete, and Rayne were engaged in a game of poker. The gambler gave Green one swift look and then became studiously interested in his hand.

Green saw that the attention of both his companions was centred upon a nearer table, occupied by five men, two of whom he recognised as Snub, and Nugget, the prospector. One of the others, a short, squat fellow, moved his right arm with difficulty, and Snap grinned as he noted the fact.

'Reckon Dutch is cussin' me for that,' he said, in a low voice to Green. 'They don't guess yu was in it, an' if they thought I knew it was them, they'd bust up the game pronto. Yes, that's Post, the skinny feller sittin' opposite Snub, who don't look so happy since we come in.'

Green did not need to ask who the fifth man was—Ginger's expression of cold hatred had already told him. Mex might claim to be a white man, but the sallow skin, beady eyes, thin cruel lips, and lank black hair told another story. He had evidently lost his money and his temper, and a savage imprecation escaped him as he flung his cards in for the third time in succession and began to roll a cigarette. Either from anger or inexperience he made poor work of it, the paper broke, and he swore again.

'What's come o' yore dude pill-maker, Mex?' asked Nugget. 'Lost it,' snapped the other.

'Where?'

Like a pistol shot the word rang through the room. It was Ginger who had spoken. No longer leaning carelessly against the bar, he had stepped forward and was facing his man with blazing eyes. For a moment Mex was too surprised to answer, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders, he sneered :

'I dunno as it's any o' yore beesness.'

For all his care in speaking the white man's tongue, the last word tripped him up, and Ginger's lips wreathed in contempt.

'I'm makin' it my beesness,' he said, and flung the little machine on the table. 'That's yore toy, ain't it?'

The other man's eyes wavered a fraction as they rested on the familiar shining object, and his pasty face went a shade paler. The men beside and behind him edged a little further away. Mex rose and picked up the cigarette-maker, examining it as though to make sure it was his property. Then he answered the question :

'S'pose it is, what's it gotta do with yu? I lose it an' yu find it. Me, I'm obleege. Yu claimin' a reeward?'

One of the Double X men sniggered at this, but most of the onlookers realised that the Y Z puncher was in deadly earnest. The two men were now alone, standing with the deserted card-table between them; all play had ceased, and there was an ominous silence. Ginger took no notice of the taunt. Crouching slightly, his right hand hanging straight by his side, his narrowed eyes bored into the man facing him.

'I'm askin' yu when an' where yu lost it?' he graned.

'An' I'm tellin' yu to go to hell an' find out,' snarled the other. 'I don't need to go that far,' replied Ginger, his tone cold and even. 'This was found beside Bud's body, an' yu dropped it there when yu murdered him, yu dirty cattle-thief.'

For a bare second the accused man hesitated, his face grey and sickly, and then, 'Yo're a damn liar,' he shouted, and reached for his gun.

Amidst the scuffling of men anxious not to intercept a possible wild shot, the two reports rang out almost as one. Then, as the acrid smoke dissipated, Mex, with a choking cry, crumpled at the knees and fell across the table, his weapon thudding on the board floor. With a set face, on which no emotion was discernible, the cowboy gazed upon the man he had slain.

'I reckon I got him for yu, Buddie,' he muttered. 'An' he got me.'

He staggered and fell into the nearest chair, sprawling across it helplessly. Instantly the room came alive again, men surging round, talking excitedly. Green and Snap were examining the wounded man; they found that the bullet had ploughed between two ribs, going clean through and missing any vital spot, loss of blood and shock being responsible for Ginger's collapse.

'Damn near thing—little bit more to the left an' they'd 'a' took the long trail together,' Snap commented, as he helped Green bandage the wound.

In the midst of this operation the door opened and the marshal came bustling in. He was a short, beefy man, with a puffy, inflamed face, in which two small eyes were set like currants in a dumpling. It is enough to say of him that the only respect he received from the majority of Hatchett's inhabitants was that engendered by his office. He wore two guns and his badge was well in evidence.

'This is a helluva fine thing, ain't it?' he began. 'Why couldn't one o' yu fetch me afore the trouble started?' A dozen explained that there was no time—that it was all over in a few minutes, and another dozen began to describe the affair to the marshal, each giving his own version, and all speaking at once.

'Awright, I can hear all that later,' he said testily. 'I ain't deaf, an' I don't want to be. Who's the corpse?'

The friends of the dead man had laid out the body on a form at the side of the room, covering the face with his hat. Tonk strode over and looked at it.

'Mex, eh?' he said, and scowled. 'Plumb heart shot. Now will one o' yu—one, I said—tell me how it happened.'

'It was thisaway, marshal,' Post Adams said. 'We're just havin' a friendly game, all quiet an' peaceful, when Ginger, Lunt, an' this other feller comes in. We don't take no notice of 'em, an' suddenly Ginger starts shootin' off his mouth at Mex, callin' him a cattle-thief, an' allowin' that he knifed Bud, which we all know was done by Injuns. Naturally Mex tells him he's a liar, an' they pulls their guns.'

'An' it was an even break,' Snap contributed. 'Ginger didn't try to bush-whack him.'

The long Double X man looked uncomfortable and felt the same; the squinting eyes of the little gunman sent a chill feeling along his spine, and he inwardly cursed himself and Dutch for not having done a better job. If Snap knew—and he evidently at least suspected—life for the pair of them became a very uncertain quantity. But nothing of this showed in his manner as he answered: 'Mebbe it was an even break, but Mex warn't lookin' for trouble. Ginger forced his hand. Looks to me as if he came a-purpose.'

Half a dozen voices corroborated the statement and Tonk pushed back his hat and scratched his frowsy head, looking furtively round the room. Green saw Poker Pete, who had kept well

in the background, nod slightly when the marshal's travelling gaze reached him. Tonk hesitated another moment, and then said :

"Pears yo're right, Post. I guess I gotta take Ginger for this." 'Better guess again, marshal,' said a quiet voice from behind, and he turned to face the speaker, Green. The Y Z man was standing easily, his hands in plain view, and a half-smile on his lips. There was no threat in his attitude and the official began to bluster.

'Look here, yu. I represent the law.'

'Glad to hear it—some o' the marshals I've met up with on'y succeeded in mis-representin' it,' Green said pleasantly.

'Mebbe they did, that ain't nothin' to do with me,' said Tonk aggressively. 'I've got the say-so in this town. Yu been runnin' on the rope too long, an' I tell yu, if I'd been around the day yu come, yu'd 'a' gone to the "cooler" 'stead o' the Y Z, an' yu can stick a pin in that.'

'Yu don't say,' remonstrated the cowboy. 'An' what for?' 'Beatin' up a valued citizen, that's what for,' said the marshal. Green laughed outright. 'The said valued citizen being a tin horn gambler who is now present an' keepin' mighty quiet,' he sneered.

'Never yu mind,' snapped the officer, who had entirely missed the savage look which Pete had favoured him with. 'If he's keepin' quiet it's on'y because he knows I'm here—'

'To do his dirty work for him,' interjected Green. Then in an instant he changed, the bantering in his voice vanished, his eyes narrowed to slits, and his attitude became one of alert preparedness.

'Let me tell yu somethin' for yore own good, marshal,' he said. 'That star yo're wearin' ain't bullet-proof, an' it ain't big enough to hide behind, as many a better man than yu has found out. Everyone who saw the shootin' knows that it was an even break, an' that Mex was guilty as hell, an' showed it. I know yu got yore orders—I saw the valued citizen give 'em to yu.' Tonk flashed an uneasy look at the gambler, and Green grinned as he continued, 'Yu shouldn't 'a' done that, marshal; yo're givin' the game away, an' the valued citizen ain't a bit pleased with yu. Now gents, I'm goin' to put a resolution to the meetin', namely, that Ginger goes back to the Y Z with me. Will anybody kindly second that?'

'I'm pleased to,' said Snap, his eyes twinkling.

'Thank yu, seh,' replied the proposer gravely, and then, 'Gents, it has been proposed and seconded that Ginger goes with me. I will now put it to the vote. All in favour will raise both hands—empty.'

He lifted his own as he spoke and there was a gun in each. Snap followed suit, squinting hopefully at the Double X men. There was no hesitation; the marshal was not popular, and the few who would have liked to support him realised that one false move would turn the comedy into a tragedy. Even the marshal knew it, and his hands were not the last to go skyward. Green's sardonic glance swept the room.

'Carried unanimous,' he said. 'Ginger, I didn't know yu was that popular.' Then to Snap, he added, 'Get him on his hoss, while I count the votes again, case I've missed any.'

For several minutes he stood there, guns poised ready for instant action, and a lurking devil of mirth in his eyes. When he had given Snap sufficient time he backed slowly towards the door.

'There, marshal, yu see how wrong yu was,' he smiled. 'Everybody allowed it was an even break an' wanted Ginger let alone. Why, yu even voted for it yore own self.'

'This ain't finishin' here,' snarled the officer.

'Well, well,' drawled the puncher. 'But don't be in a hurry, marshal.'

He slid quickly through the door, slammed it behind him, and found his horse. Vaulting into

the saddle, he waited. Snap and the wounded man were already on their way. A moment or two passed and then a narrow band of light showed that the door of the saloon was being opened. Green drove a bullet into the jamb at about the height of a shortish man's head and laughed at the speed with which the bar of light vanished.

'I told yu not to be in a hurry, marshal,' he called out, and receiving no response, added to himself, 'I reckon that'll keep 'em tied for a while.'

Turning his horse he rode slowly and noiselessly in the wake of his friends, and soon overtook them. There was no pursuit; the opening of the saloon door had been the marshal's last attempt to save his face, and had resulted in his nearly losing a part of it, for the answering bullet had been much nearer than Green had guessed or intended. Tonk was taking no more chances.

CHAPTER XII

THE news of the avenging of Bud produced a variety of sentiment at the Y Z. Ginger's friends, naturally, approved wholeheartedly and regarded the wounded man with envy and admiration. The foreman frankly stated his opinion that the killing was a misguided piece of 'damn foolishness'—that he did not believe that Mex had anything to do with the slaying of Bud, and that the only result would be a range war which would bring trouble and calamity to the Y Z. The older men, though they cared nothing for the deceased, took their cue from the foreman and were plainly pessimistic.

To Simon Petter, when he reported the matter, Blaynes was even more outspoken. He put the whole of the blame on Green, whom he accused of egging on Ginger, and hinted that he must have some hidden motive for snirring up trouble.

'He's got the earmarks of a professional gun-slinger, an' if he's that, what's he doin' around here?' he asked. 'I've a hunch we oughtta give him his time.'

But Simon did not adopt the suggestion; he was conscious of a curious liking for the stranger, and at the same time, in an indefinite way, he feared him. Was his arrival at the ranch purely accidennal or was there some sinister design behind it? That was a question Simon had wrestled with several times without coming to a satisfactory solution.

'An' now, I s'pose, we'll have Dexter goin' on the warpath, an' Tonk a-comin' round here with a warrant,' pursued Blaynes. 'Huh! that sponge,' sneered his employer. 'If I catch him on the Y Z I'll bake him as hard to find as water on the Staked Plain, marshal or not. As for Dexter, if he wants a fight he can have it; I ain't eatin' no dirt at his orders.'

The foreman looked at his boss in amazement; this was a side of him he did not know. Old the ranch-owner might be, but the spirit of the pioneer who had blazed his path into new counnry and fought to hold his place there remained.

'Why do yu reckon they tried to bump off Lunt?' asked Simon.

'No idea—private difference, I should say,' replied the foreman. 'See here, Simon, don't get the notion that I got any use for the Double X. Yu say the word an' I'll take a dozen o' the boys an' wipe 'em up.'

The cattleman shook his head. 'Let 'em make the first move,' he said. 'Yu just remember what I'm tellin' yu, if they want trouble they can have it. I ain't none so shore that—'

He left the thought unspoken, gave Blaynes a nod of dismissal, and turned away. The foreman, on his way from the house, saw Noreen talking to Green by the corral, from which he had just led his horse, and the sight drew a snarling oath from his lips. The girl was going to visit the hurt man when she met the puncher, and there was reproach both in eyes and voice when she asked how he was.

'Ginger's doin' fine,' said Green, 'but I reckon he won't never recover.' Then noting her look of consternation, he added, 'Not if yo're goin' to nurse him.'

She blushed a little and then retorted smilingly, 'Then we must find a better nurse.'

'Shucks! I didn't mean it that way,' Green protested, and grinned at the neat way in which she had turned his little joke against him.

Noreen laughed too, but in an instant her face became grave again, and she asked, 'Why did you let him do it?'

He had been expecting the question and his expression sobered immediately. 'Ginger is a grown man, ma'am, an' it was his business,' he explained. 'Bud was his friend, and he had it to do.'

'But surely it is the business of the law to punish a criminal,' she protested.

The law, meaning the marshal,' said Green. 'Well, yes, but yu see the law is such a powerful long time gettin' to work that a criminal is liable to die of old age before it gets him. An' s'pose it does get him, what happens? Why, he's allowed to escape because the sheriff is a friend, or he gets let off by a packed jury of his "peers"—the fellers who oughtta be in the dock with him. Theoretically, the law is sound enough, but out here it's just a farce and a man must do his own police-work. This feller was a cow-thief an' a murderer—his life was twice forfeit, an' I don't see that it matters whether one man or a hundred are concerned in puttin' him out o' mischief.'

He spoke seriously, and she was conscious that it was not entirely with the object of justifying Ginger, but that they were his own views, and that she might expect him to act in accordance with them. As a Western girl, born and bred, a deed of violence was no new thing to her, but this one had come very close to her, and the horror was still fresh. She realised that he was right, but she would not admit it, even to herself.

'But under your system, the man who is fast with his gun can commit any number of crimes with impunity,' she argued. 'Had this man been quicker than Ginger, he would merely have added another murder to the one he was already guilty of.'

'I ain't claimin' the system, or that it is perfect,' the cowpuncher replied. 'Yu have to have some penalty for offences against life an' property. An' yu mustn't mix up killin' with murder, too many folks do that, an' plenty o' fellers get reputations as bad men who don't deserve 'em. There's two sorts o' gunmen—one who kills for the sake of it, an' the other, who won't pull a gun until he has to, an' who gives his man an even break every time. No, the law of the gun may be defective an' primitive, but without it this country wouldn't be possible. Do yu reckon that if yore father catches a rustler with the goods he'll hand him over to Tonk?'

The girl was silenced, if not convinced, for, knowing Simon, she did not expect that he would do any such thing. Green saved her the problem of answering his question by turning the conversation.

'Yore friend has come a-visitin' again,' he said, and looking towards the ranch-house she saw that Taxman and Laban had just ridden up.

'I don't make friends so easily,' she returned, and then, 'You don't like him?'

'Yo're a good guesser,' he admitted. 'Shucks! We break even on that—he don't like me, an'—' a gleam of mirth sparkled in his eyes, 'I'm worried to death about it.'

With a flourish he replaced the hat he had been holding, slid into the saddle with the ease and grace of a young panther and sent Blue racing for the plain. Noreen proceeded on her errand of mercy and spent quite a long time with the patient. She found him cheerful, the pain of his hurt being compensated for by the fact that he had avenged his friend, and he was full of admiration for the man who had saved him from the clutches of the marshal.

'All wool an' a yard wide, that feller,' he said enthusiastically. 'I reckon he'd be a good one to tie to, Miss Norry.'

The phrase was one common enough in the locality, and indicated merely that the man to

whom it was applied could be trusted, but the girl grasped that there was another meaning, and though she knew Ginger was not intending anything of the sort, she felt herself flushing. Meanwhile, Green was pushing Blue at a good pace through the Maze. Several hours' hard riding brought him to the spot he was aiming for, the blind canyon where the trail of the stolen cattle had melted away. Here he rode into the water and turned upstream, keeping as much as possible in the shadow of the cottonwoods fringing the banks. On either side the ground sloped steeply to the frowning cliffs above. It was a peaceful scene, with the sun dappling the foliage, the piping of the birds, and the chattering of the shallow river as it raced over the stones which sought to impede its course.

The cowpuncher progressed slowly, his keen gaze searching every yard of the ground. He had covered less than a mile when the canyon narrowed and he came to a blank wall of rock which appeared to be the end of it. The foot of this was masked by a thick clump of trees into which the stream disappeared. Pushing aside the branches, which at this point almost met across the water, he forced his way through and then pulled up in astonishment.

He had come to the end of the canyon, and as he had expected, the cliff was before him. At the base of it, however, was a small natural tunnel through which the river flowed. It was a curious formation, suggesting that, in some bygone paroxysm of Nature, the rocky walls of the canyon had been flung together, welding at the top and leaving a passage for the stream at the bottom. Approaching the opening, Green saw that the tunnel was too low for a rider to pass through and that the stream appeared to occupy the whole width. A faint gleam of light apprised him that it did not extend very far.

Leading the roan, he stepped forward, cautiously sounding the depth of the water; it remained shallow, however, and the bed was firm rock, lightly covered by sand brought down by the stream. In a few moments they were emerging into daylight again, only to find the path barred by a rude pole fence. This removed, the puncher led his horse behind a clump of bushes and carefully scanned the scene before him; he had no wish to fall into another trap. He saw an open valley, oval in shape, and sloping gently at first and then steeply to the rim-rock on either side. The floor was covered with good grass, and winding through the middle was the stream which had led him to the place! The valley was something over a mile in length and about half that distance in width, and was devoid of trees save on the enclosing slopes, where groups of pine and birch could be seen among the thick undergrowth. A herd of about a hundred head of cattle was feeding leisurely, and appeared to be unattended.

Green advanced, still keeping under cover along one of the slopes and leading his horse. Presently he descried a small log shack, half-hidden by trees, on the opposite side of the valley; it seemed to be untenanted.

'It shore is a dandy place for rustlin',' soliloquised the puncher. 'First they got a desert to lose the trail on, an' if that don't work the trick, there's a stream to drive the cattle along that'll wash out every track soon as it's made, with a tunnel nobody'd ever suspicion 'less they come straight on it, an' here's a natural feedin'-ground where stock can stay hid till yu want it. Why, it's as easy as takin' money from a sleepin' kid.'

He had now worked his way along the side of the valley until he was level with the grazing animals, but they were still too far away for him to distinguish the brand, and this was imperative.

'Gotta take a chance, Blue,' he said. 'Them cows may be wear-in' honest monograms, an' we don't want to make a mistake.' Riding slowly and rather away from the herd in order not to startle it, he gradually got sufficiently near to decipher the brand. 'Crossed Dumb-bell,' he muttered. 'Huh, we gotta have a closer peep at that.' The loop of his whirled rope settled over the horns of the nearest steer and the roan braced back for the jolt as the frightened beast dashed off and rolled headlong. Green sprang to the ground, and having hog-tied the steer, examined the brand at his leisure. The story was plain enough.

'Frying Pan brand with another "pan" an' a bar through the handle,' commented the puncher. 'Pretty slick work though; in a month or so them scars will be healed over, an' as cows don't talk none, nobody'll be any the wiser. I guess that settles it an' I'd better be driftin'.'

He released the limbs of the victim and lost no time in regaining his saddle, for a steer which had been thrown is not a proposition to be enjoyably dealt with on foot. A twitch of the rope set the brute entirely free, whereupon it bellowed furiously and charged. At the same moment came the sharp report of a rifle and the venomous hum of a bullet past the puncher's ear. He looked round and saw a couple of riders spurring down upon him from the upper end of the valley.

Green did not stay to argue. Swinging the roan so as to dodge the infuriated steer, he rode for the tunnel, another bullet which drilled a hole in his hat leaving no doubt as to the intentions of the newcomers. He did not fear that they would overtake him, but they might cripple either his mount or himself, and so prevent the information he had gained being turned to account. The pursuers did not shoot again, being apparently under the impression that they could run him down; they may even have imagined that he was ignorant of the exit at the lower end of the valley.

Halfway to the tunnel the fugitive narrowly escaped a calamity. He had to pass a scattered part of the herd, and several of the animals, with usual bovine stupidity, suddenly decided to run right across his path. Blue was going at too great a pace for a sudden swerve, and there was but one way out of the difficulty. With a supreme effort, Green lifted the roan as they reached the running steers and the horse rose and cleared the obstacle with a magnificent leap. A shout from behind, either of rage or admiration, greeted the performance.

Two minutes later the puncher reached the end of the valley, flung himself from his horse and dragged his rifle from its scabbard under the left fender of the saddle. The pursuers were still coming on but with slackening speed, as though in doubt. From their appearance and gesticulations, the puncher opined that they were Mexicans. He and his horse were hidden in a thicket of bushes. Presently, as he expected, they pulled up and he could see them arguing. He levelled his Winchester and fired; the horse of the nearer rider sank to its knees and rolled over, sending the man in the saddle sprawling. Instantly his companion wheeled to ride away, but ere he could do so the gun spoke again and the second horse went down.

'That sets yu afoot anyways, yu coyotes,' muttered the marksman, and without waiting further he led the roan through the tunnel again, mounted, and headed for home at the best speed the country would allow.

Some hours later he reached the ranch and found the owner in his favourite spot on the verandah, talking to Tarman and his companion. The girl was there, listening, but taking little part in the conversation. The cowboy slid from the saddle and trailed the reins—he had now taught Blue to stay 'tied to the ground.'

"Lo, Green; yu want me?" asked Petter.

'Got some news for yu,' said the puncher, with a half-glance towards the room which served the ranch-owner as an office. But the Old Man did not take the hint.

'Well, let's hear it—our friends won't mind me 'tendin' to business for a minute,' he said, and added with a twinkle of amusement, 'You met Mr. Tarman before, I think.'

Green turned his gaze upon the visitor lounging easily in his chair, and with a perfectly grave expression on his face, said quietly, 'Shore, I lent him my hoss.'

For a brief instant Tarman's eyes flashed murder, and then he joined in the laugh which, started by Noreen, spread to the others.

'Yu gotta admit I didn't keep him long,' the big man said, and his laugh boomed out again. It was well done, but to the girl it did not ring true. She had caught that fleeting look and knew that the man's vanity had been rubbed on a sore spot, and that he would have cheerfully slain the offender.

'Well, well, what yu got to tell us, Green?' asked Simon.

The cowboy gave a bald account of the day's discoveries, and watched the faces of the visitors as he did so, but could see nothing more than a polite interest on either of them. His employer was plainly pleased.

'Yu didn't recognise them two fellers?'

'No, but they looked like Greasers, an' they could shoot.' 'Well, if yu set 'em afoot they won't get them cows shifted without help. 'Course, mebbe they got other hosses, or there's more than just the pair of 'em.'

'If there'd been more they'd 'a' come pilin' at the first shot,' Green pointed out.

'That's so,' agreed the cattleman. 'Reckon yo're tired?' 'Not so as yu'd notice it,' smiled the cowboy.

'Good for yu,' said the Old Man. 'Blaynes is out on the range somewheres. Get another hoss, pick up any o' the boys yu can find an' hump it to the Frying Pan. It's Job's business this time, but it's ourn too an' we got to help him. Yu didn't see any o' our cows, I s'pose?'

Green shook his head. 'Hadn't time to look over the herd, but I fancy they were all Frying Pan.'

As he swung into the saddle, Seth Laban rose from his chair. 'I reckon I must be goin' too,' he said.

'Why, Seth, what's yore hurry?' asked Tarman.

'Yu know I got a date with Rayne,' replied Laban. 'I told yu comin' up I couldn't stay.'

'So yu did, Seth; I done forgot it,' agreed his friend.

When Laban had taken his leave the big man turned to his host and remarked casually, 'That chap Green 'pears to be a pretty capable proposition. Handy with his weapons too, judging by the way he got that boy o' yores away from the marshal.'

'Never seen him fire a shot but I should say he ain't no novice,' Simon replied.

'Was it a fair fight, Mr. Tarman?' inquired Noreen.

'Well, it was an even break, an' I told the marshal so, but it was forced on the dead man; the Y Z boys meant to get him, an' came there a-purpose. I should say Green framed it up, an' he certainly got away with it. Funny, as I was sayin' to Seth, I believe I've seen him somewhere an' can't just fix him, but I'll bet a stack he's more gunman than cowboy.'

'He knows his work,' offered the cattleman.

'Mebbe so, but if I'm right yu gotta ask yoreself what's a gunman doin' around here?' rejoined Tarman, and having planted this seed of doubt in the minds of his hearers, he went on to talk of something else.

When Green reached the bunkhouse he found Larry lounging on the bench outside. The young man promptly greeted him, 'How's the cow-thief business?'

'Not so brisk as when yu were in it,' retorted his friend, with a grin. 'Yu go get that four-legged table yu got into the habit o' callin' a hoss, an' drape yoreself across it; if yu can find any more o' the boys, fetch 'em along.'

'Huh ! yu got that job as foreman a'ready?' snorted the other. 'If I had I'd be handin' yu yore time,' smiled Green. 'The Old Man's orders; get agoin'.'

But Larry delayed another minute. 'Say, do yu know that the Pretty Lady has been ridin' with the Handsome Stranger this afternoon?' he asked. Green looked at him and saw that the boy was not joshing. 'What are yu goin' to do about it?' he inquired.

'Me? What's it gotta do with me?' asked Larry.

'Well, I was wonderin' that myself,' replied Green slowly, and left the other to work it out.

'Hell's bells, can yu beat it?' muttered the young man, when he realised that he had been very neatly admonished. 'If he ain't the cussedest...! He gave it up and went in search of Dirty and Simple, who were somewhere about. When he returned with them, Green had turned the roan into the corral, transferring the saddle to his other pony. He explained the situation to them

while they were getting their mounts, and after snatching a hasty meal, they started for the Frying Pan ranch.

'Might've took me in yore shootin' party,' reproached Larry, who, paired with Green, was leading the way.

'No place for boys,' came the drawling reply.

'Awright, grand-pop; yu old moss-heads want to hog all the fun. D'yu reckon the marshal will start anythin'?"

'I would, in his place,' Green replied grimly. 'I'd start a journey, an' I'd make it a long one.'

For the greater part of the trip, however, Green was silent. Though he had not shown it, the knowledge that Noreen had been for a ride with Tarman annoyed him. He knew that this feeling was quite unwarranted, the girl had a right to dispose of her own company, and what was more reasonable than that she should show the visitor over the ranch? Nevertheless, the thought of it made him profane. Another thing that occupied his mind was the departure of Seth at the same moment as himself; it might have been just a coincidence but he felt instinctively that it was not.

He was still puzzling over this incident when they reached their destination. In spite of the darkness they had made good time, though as Dirty ruefully remarked, 'Supper must be damn near forgotten by now.' They rode past the bunkhouse, from which came the tinkle of a banjo and a powerful if unmelodious chorus.

'Huh! Tryin' to scare off rustlers, I guess,' commented Simple. 'Job must be away or stone deaf.'

The ranch-owner was neither, for he came to the door in answer to Green's knock. He carried a lamp in his left hand, the right being hooked in his belt in useful proximity to his gun.

"Lo, boys," he greeted, recognising them. 'What's up?"

Green explained the reason for their visit and the effect on Leeming was ludicrous—as Dirty put it—'It fair set him alight.' 'Hell's bells!' he cried. 'That's the way things allus happen on this blamed ranch. Here's Dirk an' six o' the boys away with the trail herd an' me with half a staff. But we'll get 'em, yu bet yu; we'll have them cows back here an' hang every damn thief we find with 'em. Yu boys will want to hit the way, I reckon?"

'We're aimin' to come with yu—we can get there by sun-up an' have a cat-nap on the way,'

Green replied, adding slyly, 'That is if yu want for us to come.'

'What the...' the rancher started tempestuously, and then he caught the twinkle in the speaker's eyes and grinned himself. 'Yu nearly had me goin' again, blast yu,' he said. 'Course I'll be pleased to death to have yore help. Come along to the bunkhouse an' stoke up while I get the boys together.'

Scrambling into a coat and snatching up a Winchester, Job led the way. At his entrance the concert ceased abruptly, and Charlie, who was sufficiently recovered to sit up in his bunk and manipulate his banjo, laid the instrument aside.

'Hump yoreselves, boys,' Leeming cried. 'Green here has located our cattle an' we're agoin' after 'em. Lucky, yu better stay with Charlie; the other five, with the Y Z boys, will be enough to turn the nrick.'

'Oh hell, boss, I'm fit all right,' protested Lucky. 'An' I shore owe them fellers a crack for the one they gave me.'

'Yore turn'll come—we ain't expectin' to corral the whole bunch,' said the boss. 'Somebody's gotta stay. Where in blazes is that grub I told that blasted cook to put up?"

He bustled about, pouring out torrents of abuse indiscriminately directed at his own men and the cattle-thieves, and Green was amazed at the manner in which it was received.

'Ain't he the son of a gun?' privily remarked Zeb Woods, who as acting foreman in Dirk's absence got more than his share. 'But durn it, he don't mean anythin'. He'd ride from hell an'-all to give any one of us a helpin' hand, an' we shore knows it. How's Ginger makin' it?"

'Doin' fine, barrin' the swellin',' Green replied.

'Swellin'? Why, where he swole?' asked the puzzled Woods. 'In the head,' said Green, smiling. 'Yu see, Miss Norry is nursin' him.'

A roar of laughter greeted the explanation and Woods joined in. 'I'm it,' he admitted, 'and the drinks are shore on me next time I meet yu in town. Say, he'll be havin' a heart attack too, eh?'

'Shucks! He done had that years ago, an' got over it, same as the rest of us,' volunteered Dirty.

A loud inquiry from the boss as to whether he'd got to wait all night for them put a period to the conversation, and no more time was lost in starting. Having a fixed objective, they headed straight across the Y Z range, in a direction which would leave the Parlour well to their left. For a time they were able to travel at a fast lope which ate up the miles, but when they left the range-land and plunged into the wilderness beyond, the pace had to be moderated.

Nevertheless, midnight found them little more than an hour's ride from their destination, and Leeming decided to rest both men and beasts. A fire was lighted, for the night air was very keen, the horses were picketed, and the men rolled up in their blankets and slept the sleep of the healthily-tired. Around them was the black silence, broken only by the sharp crackle of the burning logs, and the occasional cry of some wild denizen of the forest abroad on a predatory quest.

They were astir again at the first pale gleam of light behind the distant mountains. Swiftly this deepened and became a roseate glow from the midst of which the flaming rim of the sun climbed majestically above the peaks, tingeing them with gold. The daily miracle which turned a world of cold and darkness into one of warmth and light had taken place. But in the gulches, canyons, and wooded tracts gloom still resisted the invading daylight.

A gulp of hot coffee, a cigarette, and the party resumed its way, and by the time the conquest of the darkness was completed the blind canyon was reached. This was soon negotiated, and one by one they led their mounts through the tunnel, Green going first, with the boss of the Frying Pan following him.

'Damnation!' said the puncher disgustedly. 'They've razzledazzled us.'

The valley was empty. Some hundreds of yards from where they stood were two black mounds, and as the horsemen approached, these disintegrated into winged portions which took flight; the scavengers of the desert had discovered the dead horses. No other living thing was to be seen, and Job Leeming, in his disappointment, rose to heights which astonished even his own men.

'Ain't he a ring-tailed wonder?' whispered one of them to Dirty. 'I reckon he oughtta be President o' the U-nited States.' 'He shore can express himself awful easy,' admitted the other 'I guess I'd sooner shoot than talk a thing out with him.'

'Don't yu go makin' any mistakes about his shootin' either,' said the Frying Pan man. 'He's a dead game sport.'

By this time Leeming had let off steam, and with one of his astonishing changes was prepared to accept defeat more or less philosophically.

'Well, boys, we seem to have had our trouble for nothin' they've been too clever for us,' he said. 'I reckon they must have had some hosses yu didn't see, Green, or else some more o' the damn thieves happened along to shift the herd.'

The Y Z man nodded agreement, though in reality neither of the solutions satisfied him. Laban's sudden departure recurred to his mind but he could find nothing to connect an apparent stranger with the rustlers. Even if it had been done as a matter of spine against himself, it seemed inconceivable that Laban would know where to send the warning.

`Guess we'd better have a look round, now we're here,' he said. `Sorry we missed the cows, Leeming.'

`Ain't nobody's fault—just bad luck,' returned the Frying Pan boss. `Mebbe we'll pick up the trail.'

Spreading out, they combed the sides of the valley thoroughly, and found one steer only in the thick underbrush, where it had evidently been overlooked by the rustlers when the herd was gathered for a getaway. Job studied the altered brand with interest.

`Never heard of it,' he commented. `They made a good job of in. Wonder where they're sellin' 'em?'

At the far end there was a break in the saucer-like rim which shut the valley in, and this seemed to promise another outlet, but when they reached it they found that it was closed by a perpendicular ledge of rock eight feet above the grass level of the valley. From the ledge a strip of sand led through a narrow opening in the cliff to the country beyond. The stream entered at a deep gully not a yard wide, a passage impracticable even for a horse. There appeared to be no way of reaching the ledge save by climbing and the sand above it showed no tracks.

`Must have took 'em out at the other end again,' said Job. `An' that leaves us just where we was before. No good losin' time here, ooys; we'd better head for home.'

CHAPTER XIII

ON the following morning the foreman of the Y Z appeared at breakfast with a grin on his face, which broadened considerably when his eyes rested on Green.

`I hear yu didn't catch many rustlers,' he began.

`Yu heard correct,' the puncher said quietly.

`Yu was lookin' for 'em in the wrong place,' went on the foreman. `While you an' Job was pirootin' round that blind canyon, they was busy at the Frying Pan, liftin' another hundred head. S'pose that's news to yu?'

Green looked at the maliciously triumphant speaker in blank amazement; it certainly was news and of the very worst kind. What he liked still less was the meaning sneer conveyed in the question.

`Yu suggestin' it might not be news to me?' he asked.

The foreman hesitated. He had, only a little while before, plainly stated to his employer his belief that this man was working with the rustlers, and than the trip to the blind canyon was merely a ruse to leave the Frying Pan open for another raid. `A damn good exchange too, a hundred cows for a couple o' cayuses,' he had sneered. `If he was playin' straight, why didn't he drop the men 'stead o' the hosses? Accordin' to his story, they was shootin' at him.' Now, he would have given all he possessed to shout `Yes' and go for his gun, but he could not do it; the narrowed, grim eyes of the cowpuncher seemed to hypnotise him. The other men watched in silence.

Then Green spoke: `Take off yore belt, Blaynes,' he said, and at the same moment he unbuckled his own and laid it on the table. The foreman made no move.

`Take it off, yu white-livered skunk,' rasped the other.

The epithet cut like a lash, and with an oath, the foreman's right hand went to his belt, not to take it off, but to snatch the gun from its holster. In an instant Green divined his purpose and covered the space between them in one leap; his hands shot out and gripped the foreman's wrists just as the pistol cleared the scabbard. Madly Blaynes strove to loosen the clutch and aim the weapon, but he was powerless; he felt that he was held by steel vices which were

being slowly tightened and were crushing the bones of his wrists. The pain was atrocious and the sweat showed in beads upon his forehead.

'Drop that gun, yu cur!'

The harsh order was hardly necessary, for already the weapon was falling from the numbed, lifeless fingers. As soon as he heard it thud upon the floor, Green released his grip and stepping back, swung his right first, and sent in a crashing blow which caught Blaynes on the point of the jaw, dashing him, stunned and senseless, into a corner of the room. Then he picked up his belt, buckled it on, and without a word left the bunkhouse.

'Gosh!' said Durran, as he helped to lift the stricken man into his bunk and tried to revive him. 'I'd sooner be kicked by an army mule.'

'Served him right for tryin' to pull a gun on an unarmed man,' snorted Dirty.

'Well, mebbe it warn't the right play,' Durran had to admit; 'but a foreman can't allow his outfit to rough-ride him.'

'An' he can't rough-ride them neither, which is one o' the things Rattler's gotta learn,' retorted Dirty.

On leaving the bunkhouse, Green went in search of Simon. He found him in his office, and the worried look on his face did not lighten when he saw the visitor. Green stated his business bluntly: 'There's somethin' yu have to know. Yore foreman accused me of runnin' with the gang that's rustlin' yore cows, tried to pull a gun on me, an' I knocked him cold. Reckon yu better give me my time.'

Old Simon studied the puncher for a moment. He had had dealings with many men during an eventful life and could usually size one up to his own satisfaction at least, but this one puzzled him. He did not believe that Green was crooked, and that odd feeling of attraction which he had experienced before again assailed him. He became surprisedly aware that he was loth to let the puncher go.

'What yu aimin' to do?' he asked.

'Stay around,' replied the other. 'I ain't double-crossin' yu an' I'm agoin' to prove it in time, but this ranch ain't big enough for me an' Blaynes. The next play he makes will be the finish—for him.'

It was a plain statement of fact, with no trace of boast about it, and the cattle-owner knew that the speaker meant just what he said. He had to choose between the two men. For a while he was silent, trying to find a way out. Presently he hit upon one.

'I ain't accusin' yu, an' Blaynes has been with me for some time,' he began slowly. 'Supposin' yu stay on the pay-roll an' let on yu have quit. I reckon that would give yu more of a free hand.'

The cowpuncher considered the proposition for a few moments and saw that it possessed advantages. As a mere loafer in town, attached to no ranch, he could not be regarded as a danger by the rustlers, and apart from the personal enmities he had acquired, which troubled him not at all, could expect to be relieved of their attentions. Another possibility also presented itself.

'I'll take yu,' he said, 'but don't yu forget that I came to ask for my time, an' yu give it me.'

'That's whatever,' Simon agreed. 'We've had a hell of a row over yu beatin' up my foreman, an' we ain't on speakin' terms.' He produced a roll of bills and peeled off a number of them.

'Here's what's due to yu, an' a month's pay in advance; yu want to be well heeled to hang about town. Where do yu aim to put up?'

'The hotel—I'll hear all the news there. Yu had any offers for the range?'

'Why, no,' said Simon in surprise, and then, 'Well, Tarman did mention a figure, but in was so low that I took it he was jokin' an' laughed it off. What yu askin' that for?'

'Just a notion I had,' replied Green. 'Well, I'll be gettin' my war-bags an' hosses; I'm takin' Blue Devil with me.'

'Shore, I gave yu the hoss,' Simon said.

The cowpuncher returned to the bunkhouse and began to pack his few belongings. The place was empty save for the invalid, Ginger, the rest of the outfit being abroad on various duties. Blaynes, according to the sick man, had eventually been restored to consciousness, and had departed, vowing all kinds of reprisals.

'Looks like yu was preparin' for a long trip,' was the nearest approach to the question that Ginger would venture on. 'Only to town, but I may be there quite a spell,' said Green. 'I'll be at the hotel if I'm wanted,' he added meaningly. 'So long, Ginger, an' good luck.'

The wounded man asked no more, but through the open door he presently saw his friend ride away on Blue, leading his other pony, and drew his own conclusions. When, later in the day, Larry, with Dirty and Simple, rode in, he told them the news and a small indignation meeting was immediately held, which resulted in the three striding determinedly to the ranch-house. That they walked speaks eloquently for the state of their minds, for your cowboy normally will fork his pony to cross a street. Old Simon met them at the door.

'Well, boys, what's eatin' yu,' he asked, scenting trouble from their perturbed appearance.

'We understan' yu fired Green,' Larry blurted out.

'Well, what of it?' asked the boss acidly.

'We don't reckon he's had a square deal, an...' Larry bogged down.

'We want our time,' Dirty came to the rescue.

'We're speakin' for Ginger too,' added Simple, not to be left out.

For about ten seconds the old man glared at them in speechless amazement, and then the storm broke:

'Damnation!' he roared. 'What the devil's it gotta do with yu if I fire a hand? Have I gotta ask a passel o' bone-headed cowwrestlers how I'm to run my own ranch? If yu want yore time yu can have it, every mother's son o' ye, but if yu got any sense at all yu'll get to hell out o' this an' mind yore own business, an' I reckon Green'll tell yu the same if yu ask him. Now, get out, 'fore I lose my wool over yu.'

As Dirty put it afterwards, 'The depitation then withdrew,' and the Old Man, with a final snort of disgust, vanished into the office.

'An' now where are we?' disconsolately queried Larry, when they foregathered again at Ginger's bedside, and informed him of the result of their protest. 'Did we resign, were we fired, or are we still "Wise-heads"?'

'"Bone-heads" the Old Man called us,' Dirty reminded. 'But he didn't pay us off, so I reckon we still belong.'

'One o' yu ride in tonight an' see Green,' suggested Ginger. This seemed a good idea and they cut the cards to decide who should make the trip. The choice fell to Larry, much to the disgust of the other two, which was not decreased when he added cheerfully, 'Now yu gotta cut to see which o' yu takes my place line-ridin' to-night—I shan't be back in time likely.'

'By Gosh, yu got nerve,' snorted Dirty.

Nevertheless, being good fellows and good friends, they submitted, and in due course Larry set out in search of the man for whom they had gone on strike. He found him in the bar of the Folly, and far less grateful than the circumstances might seem to warrant. After listening to the emissary's account of the bearding of their employer and the reception they met with, he remarked :

'Huh! "Bone-heads" he called yu, did he? Well, he got yu dead right. D'yu reckon any self-respectin' feller is goin' to let his men dictate to him? I wonder he didn't fire you straight away.'

'We did it to help yu,' Larry reminded him.

'Shore, I know,' smiled Green, 'but yu get this into yore brainbox—yu can help me the best way by holdin' down yore jobs at the Y Z. There's dirty work goin' on, an' I'm aimin' to clean

up before I leave the district, for my own satisfaction, yu understand. What yu gotta remember is that I'm an outawork puncher, layin' off for a spell, an' not too well disposed to the ranch that give me the bounce. When I want any o' yu I'll let yu know. Seen anythin' o' Job?"

'Nope,' said Larry, 'but I hear he's the maddest man this side o' the Rockies. Simple ran across Woods an' he said Leeming damn near blew up when they got back an' found another lot lifted. These fellers ain't sleepin' on their job for shore.'

'All the same, they'll be caught nappin' one o' these days,' Green retorted, with a grin.

'See here, Don,' wheedled Larry. 'What about me cuttin' loose an' throwin' in with yu? The others can look after the ranch end of it, an' two of us can keep cases on these cutthroats better than one.'

'Nothin' doin',' was the reply. 'I'm playin' a lone hand for the present. Yu gotta toddle back to the Y Z like a good little boy, be very polite to the foreman, an' not too kind to me.'

'That last bit'll be easy enough, yu hog,' returned his friend, and with a casual salutation, took his departure just as Tarman, his henchman, Pete, and the marshal came in together. Green had stepped over to the bar and was talking to Silas, to whom he had already confided his rupture with the Y Z, knowing that this would be the speediest way of spreading the version he wished to be known.

'So yu ain't quittin' us for a while,' the bartender remarked. 'Goin' to tie up with Leeming?' The puncher shook his head. 'Guess I'll take a holiday,' he said. 'Might do a bit o' prospectin' too; there oughta be gold in some o' them creeks towards Big Chief.'

Tarman and his party were beginning a game of cards at a near-by table, and the puncher had spoken loudly enough for the words to reach them. He caught a quick look from the gambler. 'Old Nugget don't seem to find much dust; if he does he spends it somewhere else,' Silas rejoined.

'I've a hunch it's there anyways, an' I might as well give her a trial; I've got all the time there is,' Green said carelessly. He stood watching the play for a while and then went out.

'Huh! Prospectin', eh?' said the marshal, as the door closed behind him. 'Reckon he won't get very fat on that. Funny how a busted puncher's thoughts allus turn to gold-diggin'.' 'Yu think he meant it then?' asked Poker Pete.

'He said it loud enough.'

'He said it too loud—he meant us to hear. I'll want to see him at work afore I swaller that.'

'Bah! He won't trouble about us, Pete,' Tonk said. 'He's through with the Y Z.'

'No doubt o' that,' corroborated Tarman. 'I was there this afternoon. He damn near killed Blaynes, an' Petter is mighty sore over it. He'd be a useful man.'

The gambler swore luridly. 'I'm agoin' to feed Mister Green to the buzzards,' he said savagely.

'I ain't objectin', Pete,' Tarman observed. 'But why not use him first? Think it over.'

The man's voice was quiet, silken almost, but it carried a note of authority to which the gambler offered no further resistance. Tarman smiled. 'Get him to the Fort an' put it to him—one o' the boys there can do it, a stranger, o' course. If he throws in, well an' good; if he don't keep him there.'

The emphasis on the last three words brought a meaning smile to the faces of his listeners, and Pete was quick to agree: 'Yo're right, Joe, as usual; that's the play to make. I'll put California on the job—he's done some prospectin' in his time, an' he ain't known here.'

Tarman nodded his approval, and the game proceeded.

On leaving the Folly, Green went to the store, where he purchased a small hatchet, a miner's pick, a shovel, and a shallow pan for washing dirt. He also replenished his stock of ammunition and tobacco, and laid in a varied assortment of provisions.

'Goin a-travellin'?' asked the storekeeper.

'Takin' a litle holiday—got sick o' poundin' beasts,' explained the customer. 'Got any fish-hooks?'

'Shore I have—if I can find 'em. Yu aimin' to combine business an' pleasure?'

'Yu called it—that's just my idea. When I get tired o' diggin' up nuggets I'll catch me a trout or two for supper.'

'Reckon yu will get more fish than gold,' laughed the old man, 'though I dunno why there shouldn't be some good pickin's; it was there once.'

Having arranged for his purchases to be sent to the hotel, the puncher returned there himself, satisfied with the evening's work. He had recognised that some good excuse for his remaining in Hatchett's was essential, and that it must be one that would explain solitary excursions into the surrounding country. So he had made his bluff and with customary thoroughness intended to carry it through. That Tarman was in some way mixed up with the rustling he now felt convinced, and also that it was Laban who had so neatly circumvented the attempt to recover the stolen Frying Pan herd.

Broad smiles broke out on the faces of early risers in Hatchett's next morning when they saw a cowboy riding slowly along the street upon a pony whose air was clearly one of chastened disgust at being festooned with the unusual implements which constitute the impedimenta of a prospector. Green returned the smiles and replied in kind to the various jocular greetings. He welcomed these effusions, for they signified that he was being taken seriously. Two miles out of town he had an encounter which pleased him still more when Noreen loped round a bend in the trail. He snatched his hat off as she pulled up and surveyed his baggage with patent amusement.

'I'm glad you didn't inflict that on Blue, it would have broken his heart,' she said, and then, her face sobering, 'Why have you left the Y Z?'

'Me an' the foreman had an argument,' he replied gravely, but the little crinkles at the corners of his eyes were much in evidence, and she knew that he was anything but downcast. She determined to punish him.

'Dad told me you nearly killed Blaynes,' she said severely. 'I'm afraid you're of a quarrelsome disposition—we seem to have had nothing but trouble since you came.'

The reproof did not have the effect she expected, for the recipient grinned widely, and asked, 'Yu blamin' me for the rustlin' too?'

'You know I did not mean that,' the girl replied indignantly. 'Why do you always put me in the wrong?'

'Must be my quarrelsome disposition,' he returned, and then, noting the expression on her face, added, 'I shore am a trouble-hunter, yu see.'

His quizzically woebegone air dispersed her resentment and she smiled as she said, 'You have certainly made a lot of enemies. Why don't you go away?'

'Do yu want me to?' he countered.

The blunt question made her hesitate. For some reason which she did not attempt to account for she knew that she would be sorry if he took her advice but, of course, she could not tell him so.

'I am still in your debt, and I naturally do not wish that harm should come to you,' she fenced.

'Yu don't owe me anythin',' he replied. 'As for enemies, well I reckon the man who never makes any don't amount to much. I ain't runnin' away.'

'You are risking your life just for a matter of pride?' she queried.

'That, an'—other things,' he smiled. 'Yu see, I've a hunch there's a gold-mine around here, an' I aim to locate it.'

Noreen gathered up her reins. She did not in the least believe he was staying to hunt gold, but she knew he would not tell her anything he did not want to—he was not the type.

'I sincerely hope you will be fortunate,' she said.

'Thank you, ma'am, if I get what I'm hopin' for I'll be more than that,' the puncher said, and again there was the look in his eyes which had stirred her pulses once before in the street at Hatchett's. At the touch of the spur her pony jumped forward, and with a wave of the hand she was gone. Green watched until a turn in the trail took her from sight, and then resumed his way.

'She shore didn't want me to clear out, but shucks, there ain't nothin' to that,' he mused.

'Reckon if our ears was longer, hoss, we'd make a fair pair o' jackasses, so don't yu go puttin' on any frills either.'

It was towards noon when he reached the blind canyon, for he had travelled by devious ways; it was possible that his movements might be watched and he wished his choice of a locality to commence operations to appear haphazard. Several times during the journey he had paused and investigated certain spots as though considering them. He now did the same as he stood on the bank of the stream, about halfway along the canyon, and then he spoke aloud: 'She'll do. I reckon there oughta be colour in them sands, an' there's shore enough trout in the pools below. Anyway, she's a dandy place for a camp.'

He led his horse back to a strip of grass which stretched from the shady bank of the stream to the overhanging cliff which formed one of the walls of the canyon, stripped the animal and tethered it with his rope. Then winh his axe he attacked a nearby thicket and cut a number of light poles. With these, and the strippings from them, he soon erected a lean-to shelter, choosing a spot where the rock-face shelved and formed a shallow cave. In this he deposited his baggage, and having lighted a fire, began to prepare a meal. This despatched, he potted about the camp making his hut more weatherproof, cutting additional fuel, and gathering spruce-tops for his bed. Presently he took the spade and the shallow pan and went down to the stream to make his first bid for fortune. He found it hard and disappointing work, for no sign of the precious metal rewarded his efforts.

'Durn it, this ain't goin' to be such a picnic as I thought,' he soliloquised. 'Guess I'll have to look around for likelier spots.'

He tried several other places with the same result, and at length flung down his tools in disgust and went a-fishing. Here he met with more success and soon three speckled beauties lay on the grass beside him. He broiled them for his supper and turned in. On the following morning he again tackled the search for wealth and found it no more successful or attractive than it had been the day before. But he stuck manfully to it, for he was conscious of a conviction that he was not alone in the canyon. Therefore, he was not so surprised as he appeared to be when a rider came ambling along the bank of the stream on which he was working, and pulled up to watch with a cordial greeting of, 'Howdy, stranger.' Green returned the salutation, while his quick eyes gathered the details of the newcomer's appearance. He was evidently a cowhand, about forty, with a clean-shaven, open face, good-humour in every line of it. He carried a revolver at his hip and had a winchester on the saddle. He was riding a pinto horse the brand on which Green could not see. Pushing back his big sombrero, the visitor said: 'Findin' much?'

Green, kneeling over the pan, grinned up at him. 'Plenty dirt,' he replied, 'but not a smidgin' o' gold so far.'

The stranger looked around. 'Seems a likely place,' he remarked. 'But that's the funny thing 'bout minin'; yu never can tell.'

'I take it yo're speakin' from experience.'

'Shore I am—wasted part o' my life in California. Meanin' no offence, I take it yu are new at this game.'

'Yu take it correct; I reckon I must seem plumb clumsy.'

The other man laughed. 'Everythin' has to be learned, an' yu shore are makin' yoreself in a mess. Lemme show yu the trick of it.'

Dismounting from his horse, he trailed the reins, and took the pan of dirt Green was beginning to wash. In about half the time the novice had required the pan was empty save for a tiny residue of sand which the operator scanned eagerly, and then threw out.

'Not a colour,' he said. 'Well, let's try her again.'

'Yu shore have got that there pannin' business thrown an' tied,' Green remarked, as he watched the deft hands of the expert. 'I'm hopin' yu'll stay an' eat with me; my camp's just handy.'

'Yu bet I will. I'm short on grub an' got a goodish way to go,' replied the other.

The puncher left him busy with his self-imposed task and went to prepare a meal. A few fortunate casts provided him with fish, and when, in response to his hail, the visitor reached the camp, an appetising odour of broiled trout and coffee greeted him. Facing his host, cross-legged on the grass, he attacked the food like a hungry man.

'Say, these fish is prime,' he remarked presently. 'Yu may be a mite awkward with a gold-pan but with a frying-pan yo're ace-high.'

Over the meal the newcomer grew communicative. His name, he said, was Dick West, more commonly known as 'California,' and he was now punching for an outfit whose headquarters were situated at the base of the Big Chief range.

'What brand?' asked the host.

'Crossed Dumb-bell,' replied the other, watching closely.

'New to me,' Green said carelessly. 'Didn't know there was a ranch in that part, but then I ain't infested this locality long my own self.' He went on to give his own name, and the bare fact of his dismissal from the Y Z, taking care that his resentment should not be too obvious. The stranger nodded understandingly.

'If you weren't wedded to thisyer grubbin' for gold, yu could come along o' me,' he offered. 'I reckon we could use another man. The pay is fifty per an' shares, an' the shares is better than the fifty per I'm tellin' yu, for the right man.'

'Sounds good,' Green commented.

'It's as good as it sounds too,' said the other. 'Old Jeffs ain't a bad sort either.'

'That the boss?'

'Actin'-boss—there's another feller back of him.'

For some time they smoked in silence, Green apparently turning over the proposition in his mind; it was no part of his plan to accept eagerly. That the rustlers saw in him a useful recruit was possible, and what he wanted them to believe, but there was also the chance that this was merely a trap to destroy him. Nevertheless, he intended to go, for it was what he had been hoping for. It was the visitor himself who brought matters to a head. Getting up, he stretched lazily, and remarked :

'Well, thanks for the feed. I gotta drift; yu comin' along?' 'Guess I might as well,' Green replied. 'I'll cache my tools here an' I can come back if I want to.'

This did not take long and having saddled his pony, he was ready.

'Ain't yu got another hoss—to carry yore pack?' queried West, and the puncher hid a smile, guessing that perhaps his visitor had expected to see the roan. He shook his head.

'Not here,' he replied. 'Bullet's a good little hoss. He carried the pack an' me, though I ain't sayin' he liked it.'

'Some hosses is damn near human,' said West, as he led the way up the canyon.

They reached the tunnel and passed through into the valley, heading straight across for the far end. Green wondered how they would get out; he soon learned. On reaching the ledge which had baffled the Frying Pan posse, West said:

'We gotta get down here an' do a bit o' work.'

Turning to the right, he conducted his companion to a thick clump of brush which at first

glance appeared to be impenetrable. They found a way in, however, and in the centre lay a pile of long, roughly-fashioned planks.

'Reckon a couple'll be enough,' said California. 'Give us a hand.'

The planks were stout and it required two trips to get them to where they had left the horses. Placed side by side, with ends resting on the ledge, they made a practicable gangway for the animals. They were then returned to their hiding-place and the men clambered up the face of the ledge on foot. West directed

Green to mount, and then took his blanket, rolled it and tied one end of his lariat round the middle. He too then mounted and pacing his horse directly in the wake of his companion, dragged the roll of blanket behind him, completely obliterating their tracks in the soft sand.

'Smart Injun dodge that,' commented Green. 'Yu thinkin' anybody's after us?'

Nope, but we use that valley an' ain't honin' to advertise it,' was the meaning reply.

In a few moments they left the sand, descending a stony slope into another broad grass depression, and from thence plunging into a network of rocky winding gulches, ravines, and patches of forest. Through this labyrinth they followed a definite trail, over which cattle had evidently passed at no distant date. Only one incident of note occurred and that was when California got down to drink at a stream. As he lifted his foot to the stirrup his horse reared suddenly, and taken unawares, he lost his balance and toppled backwards into a bush.

Instantly there came a warning rattle and a threatening head shot up, poised to strike, only a foot from the prostrate man's face. Another second and the poisonous fangs would have done their deadly work, but Green's gun spoke and the reptile's head, shattered by the bullet, fell back into the bush. When West got to his feet he was shaking.

'Gawd, that was a close call,' he said. 'I'm thankin' yu, pardner, an' if ever I can square the 'count, yu can bank on me. Yu shore are some slick with a gun.'

'There wasn't much time,' Green laughed. 'I just naturally didn't want to lose that job yo're gettin' me.'

West climbed his horse, cursing it good-naturedly as he did so. 'There ain't many things I'm scared of, but snakes, ugh! I once see a feller pass out from a snake-bite,' he said.

The afternoon was well-advanced when they crossed a large expanse of open range and pulled up in front of a group of buildings, comprising a roomy ranch-house, bunkhouse, blacksmith's shop, and a corral. All were constructed of logs and, Green noted, had not been long erected. Several men lounging by the bunkhouse door greeted his companion.

"Lo, Dick, yu got back," said one.

'Why, no, but I'm liable to arrive any moment,' smiled California, and the user of the conventional absurdity was immediately pounded on the back.

'Aw well, yu know what I mean,' he protested.

West led his companion to the ranch-house a little distance away, and in response to his hail, another man emerged—a shorn, bow-legged fellow with squinting eyes and a hard mouth.

He surveyed the couple narrowly for a few minutes and then asked :

'What's yore trouble, West?'

In a few brief sentences the ex-miner gave Green's history as he knew it, and finished by asking a job for him; the rattle-snake incident was omitted. The decision was soon made.

'Yo're hired; all yu gotta do is obey orders an' ask no questions,' said the bow-legged man.

'Yu'll find that gold yo're huntin' for right here. Take him along, Dick.'

He turned away and the two punchers, after disposing of the horses in the corral, made their way to the bunkhouse. Here Green was casually presented to the nine or ten men present as a new hand. He saw at a glance that they were a tough lot, men of middle age or more for the most part, ruffians of a type only too plentiful in the West at that time, a cursing, hard-drinking, fighting crew who would stop at nothing when their greed or passions were aroused. After his first entrance they took but little notice of him, though he could see that his

new friend, Dick, was popular enough. The bunkhouse was comfortable, the food provided both good and plentiful. He gathered nothing from the general conversation, save once, when the mysterious Spider was mentioned.

'Who is that?' he asked of West, who was seated next to him. 'The main boss—ain't here much,' was the reply.

CHAPTER XIV

TARMAN was not one to let the grass grow under his feet; he soon became an almost daily visitor at the Y Z, where he exerted himself to the utmost to please both the owner and his daughter. The latter, though her doubts were not entirely dispelled, could not altogether resist the attraction of his personality. They rode often, and despite his defeat by Blue Devil, she had to admit that he was both at home and looked well in the saddle. Moreover, he was studiously respectful and attentive. Though he did not make open love to her, she was aware of his admiration. It was after one of these excursions, when sitting on the verandah with father and daughter, that Tarman made his first reference to Green.

'That puncher yu fired hasn't pulled his freight, I notice,' he said. The roan yu give him is still in the hotel corral.'

'Didn't yu say he was going prospectin'?' Simon asked Noreen. 'That is what he told me,' she replied, and did not fail to note the little crease in Tarman's brow.

'Some folks find gold in other folks' cattle,' he sneered. 'Anybody can buy a miner's outfit. It's bein' said in town that he's got into bad company.'

Noreen laughed. 'Town talk; why, I wouldn't condemn a coyote on that.'

'Neither would I, not if I was at all acquainted with the coyote,' smiled the big man, 'but one o' the Double X boys claims that he saw Green over towards Big Chief, ridin' with a mighty hard-lookin' crew, strangers to these parts. I'm thinkin' he may have found them rustlers he was lookin' for.'

'Sounds queer—I don't know of any ranch over there,' said Simon. 'I expect it's just as well I got rid of him.'

The girl said no more, but the information made her uneasy. She knew, of course, that Tarman was jealous of the onher, cleverly as he tried to conceal the fact, but she did not think he had invented the story, and meeting Larry later on, she asked a plain question.

'Yes, Miss Norry,' he told her. 'It was Dutch who claimed to have seen him, an' o' course some o' them smart Alecks gotta start ornamentin' his yarn. Why, one of 'em told me Green had been seen alterin' brands! He warn't quite so shore of his facts when I'd done arguin' with him,' he finished, grinning at the recollection of an indignant citizen trying to curse and retract his statements at the same time, while his face was being enthusiastically jammed into the dust of the street.

The girl smiled too, for the young puncher's wholehearted faith in his friend was good to see. It cheered her also to find it was shared by others; Ginger, now well enough to sun himself on the bench outside the bunkhouse, was equally emphatic.

'Don't yu worry, Miss,' he said. 'That feller's as straight as a string, an' if them bums in Hatchett's get too fresh, me an' one-two more'll have to go in an' read the Riot Act to 'em. He'll show up again, fine as silk.'

This prediction was realised sooner than the maker of it anticipated for that very evening Green rode into town. For once rumour had spoken truly, for his new job had taken him, with half a dozen others, to a small, hidden valley, and the work done there was the rebranding of a herd of Frying Pan cattle.

'Reckon yu can use a straight iron?' asked Jeffs, and on Green replying in the affirmative,

that part of the job was assigned to him, the others cutting out, throwing and tying the victims. Without it being noticed, Green managed to introduce a slight variation in the brand which would enable him to identify the animals he had operated upon. He was a quick and accurate worker and Jeffs meant what he said when he complimented him.

'Yu done a good job,' was his comment, when the last of the herd staggered to its feet, shook its head, and charged blindly after its companions. 'Reckon yo're due for a rest. I want somebody to go into Hatchett's. How about it?'

'Glad to,' replied the puncher. 'When do I start?'

'Right away, if yu like,' said Jeffs. 'Yu can stay the night there an' come back in the mornin'.'

On their return to the ranch, Jeffs handed Green a sealed packet. 'Just leave it at the hotel—he may not be there,' he said. 'Anyways, there's no answer.'

The messenger slipped the packet into the pocket of his chaps, merely noting that it was addressed in the name of 'Marway,' and went off to saddle a fresh mount. He had not gone far on his journey when West caught him up.

'Wasn't expectin' yu,' remarked Green. 'Jeffs forget somethin'?'

'Nope, said I could come along,' replied the other. 'I'm just apinin' for civilisation.'

'There's about as much of it in Hatchett's as there was gold in that creek yu found me pannin',' Green told him.

'Mebbe, but there's liquor, an' a chance to buck the wheel an' lose some o' my hard-earned wealth,' was the smiling reply. 'I ain't been there yet; what's it like?'

'Just the same as any other cow-town,' said Green. 'Reckon if somebody mixed 'em up in a herd, it'd be hell of a job to cut out the town yu wanted—this is, if you was silly enough to want any of 'em.'

California laughed and went on to tell of the 'boom' towns he had encountered during his mining travels, towns which sprang up like mushrooms in a night when a lucky strike was made, and vanished as quickly when the diggings petered out.

'Yes, sir,' he said. 'I've gone to sleep in what looked like a thrivin' an' busy settlement an' woke up in the mornin' to find nearly every blame buildin' gone, an' me for the on'y inhabitant. Most of the said buildin's bein' tents transportation wasn't so darned difficult.'

He was one of those easy talkers who enjoy an audience, and an adventurous and by no means blameless career, regarding which he showed no reticence, provided him with plenty of material. Born in a mining camp, he had been prospector, gambler, bartender, mule-skinner, and cowpuncher, besides engaging between while in other less laudable means of getting a living. He had made fortunes and lost them.

'Some fellers can freeze on to the dollars,' he laughed. 'Me, I never could nohow.'

Green listened, throwing in a remark now and then, but in no wise returning the other's confidences. Only once he asked a direct question: 'Ever run across a chap named Webb, a big, beefy feller with red hair?' 'Don't remember any such. What was he?' 'A damn thief—but he called himself a cattleman.'

The rasp in the voice made West look at the speaker. 'I'm guessin' he ain't a friend o' yores,' he hazarded.

'Yo're right,' responded Green. 'I'm aimin' to make cold meat of him someday.'

Night was coming on when they reached their destination and the town was showing signs of emerging from the stagnation of the day. Green left his packet at the hotel, and having arranged for beds, he and his companion were free to 'take in the town.' Their first call was at the stores, for both were in need of tobacco, and the old proprietor greeted them with an odd look of surprise. All he said, however, was, 'Found that gold-mine yet?'

The cowpuncher shook his head and grinned. 'Them tools o' yores has been plumb unlucky so far,' he said. 'But the fishhooks came in right handy. Any news?'

'Well, I dunno as there is. The marshal has bin shootin' off his mouth about a feller who was reckoned to be prospectin', an' if I was that feller an' had to come to town, I'd have a fast hoss where I could get to him easy, in case I wanted to leave in a hurry.'

The hint was plain enough. 'Tonk ain't the holy terror he'd like to be thought,' smiled Green. 'All the same, if I was that feller I'd be mighty obliged to yu.'

They walked down the street in the direction of the Folly. The only bit of excitement was provided by a pup which, bolting headlong from a couple of yelling children, collided with a pedestrian. The latter, swinging a heavy foot, lifted the astonished cur well into the middle of the road, where it was triumphantly pounced upon by the pursuers. The pedestrian turned into the saloon, after hesitating outside the Dance Hall, where the stamping of many feet on the boarded floor and the howl of a tortured fiddle proclaimed that a dance was in progress.

Green and his companion followed. One swift glance as they crossed the space between the door and the bar told Green that, in some quarters anyway, his appearance was unlooked for. "Lo, Silas," he said, and then, seeing Snap Lunt, Durran, and Nigger a little further along the bar, he added, 'Howdy, boys; yu joinin' me?'

'Shore,' replied Snap, but the other two mumbled some excuse and turned away. Green laughed.

'Ain't swore off, have they, Snap?' he inquired.

'Not so as yu'd notice it, but they dassn't drink with yu; Blaynes is settin' over there.'

Green looked in the direction indicated and saw that the foreman of the Y Z was playing poker with Pete, Laban, and Tarman.

'It don't seem to worry yu none,' he said.

The little gunman smiled grimly. 'I ain't scared o' Blaynes,' he said.

Green spun a dollar on the bar to pay for the drinks and Silas picked it up. 'Why don't yu pay in dust?' he bantered.

'What, an' have all town campin' on my trail for the next week. Yu must think I'm well named,' retorted the puncher.

'I never did think that,' grinned Silas. 'But say, you want to watch out; it isn't none o' my business, but some people was expectin' yu to-night.'

The speaker's glance rested for a second or two on Tarman and his companions. Through apparently playing cards, it was plain that they were also deep in conversation. At that moment a boy from the hotel entered and handed Pete a package. Green recognised it. The gambler read the contents, said something in a low voice, and they all laughed.

Green sensed that something was about to happen. That he had been deliberately sent into Hatchett's he had already suspected, but for what purpose he had yet to find out. Snap and West were busy swapping gold-mining experiences, for the gunman had also followed the trail of the pick and shovel, and this left the puncher at liberty to study his surroundings. The room was fairly full, and though he had no reason to think he was disliked, he knew that if it came to a showdown, most of the men present would stand aloof or take sides against him. The entry of four Double X punchers led by their one-eyed chief did not add to his feeling of security. As though they had been waiting for this reinforcement, the poker party broke up and adjourned to the bar. Again the door swung to admit Larry and Dirty. The former gave a whoop when he saw Green.

'Gee, Dirty, we shore are in luck. There's the ruddy minin' magnit, with nobody but Snap to waste his substance on. Let's provide him with a better opportunity.'

Disregarding the scowls of their foreman, they ranged themselves by the side of Green and his companion, and glass in hand smiled genially on those around them. They had come to town quite by chance, looking for no more than a drink or two and a game of cards, but when

they saw the company in the saloon they realised that something was on. Others, not in any way interested, seemed to know it too and there was an air of general expectancy about the whole gathering. Then the marshal came in, glared savagely at Green for an instant, and joined Tarman's group at the bar.

Green, replying absently to Larry, was to all appearances ignorant of the fact that he was in a hornets' nest. West, at any rate, was not deceived, for he whispered, 'Get outa this; it's a frame-up an' yu ain't gotta chance.'

Even had the cowpuncher been the man to take it, however, the warning came too late, for at the same moment Tarman lifted his hand and cried, 'Set 'em up for the company, Silas.' Then he looked directly at Green, and added, 'With one exception, o' course; I don't drink with rustlers.'

No sooner were the words spoken than Tarman found himself standing alone; Green's companions also fell away; it was entirely the business of the two principals, and however interested the others might be, none of them wanted to stop a bullet not intended for him. The cowpuncher did not reply immediately to the insult, and there was a moment of tense, hard-breathing silence. Then suddenly he straightened up.

'Tarman,' he said slowly, 'I hope yu can shoot better than yu can ride.'

The big man's vanity was touched on the raw and his face flushed redly at this allusion to his downfall. He was about to make an angry reply when the marshal pushed forward, gun in hand.

'There'll be no shootin' here, gents, 'less I do it,' he said. 'I'll bore the first man that tries to pull a gun. If yu gotta difference, settle it some other way. Yu got all out-doors to do it in.'

Green laughed outright, for he knew now that Tarman had never intended to get into a gun-fight with him, the marshal's intervention having been carefully arranged. So that the big man's protest and the officer's refusal to consider it did not surprise him.

'It can't be did, Mr. Tarman,' Tonk said. 'I gotta see the law...'

'Drop that gun, marshal; I've got yu covered,' broke in a sharp voice.

The marshal's eyes positively bulged as he saw Green's right-hand gun, held close to the hip, was aimed at his heart. How it had come to be drawn he could not comprehend. He could have sworn he was watching his man, and he had seen no movement, and a gasp of astonishment from the onlookers proclaimed that they were equally puzzled. The marshal's pistol clanked on the floor; he was not anxious to wear wings. The cowpuncher holstered his own weapon, then looked at Tarman.

'That lets the marshal out,' he said. 'He's spoke his little piece an' obeyed orders. What's the next move in this frame-up?'

'I dunno what yo're talkin' about,' retorted Tarman. 'If the marshal hadn't butted in I'd have shot it out with you, an' been damn glad o' the chance.'

The marshal won't butt again,' Green reminded.

'P'raps not, but he's put in a protest, an' I have some respect for the law, if you haven't.'

'Reckon the on'y law yu got any respect for is the law o' self-preservation,' the cowpuncher sneered, and laughed as he saw the taunt sink in. 'Well, got any ideas?'

'Yes, I got the idea that yu are a professional killer an' that yu are scared to face a man without yore guns,' said Tarman. 'Take off yore belt an' I'll kill yu with my hands, no holds

barred. Now what have yu got to say?"

'Who'll guarantee that I get my guns back?' asked Green, suspicious that this might be a ruse to catch him unarmed. 'I will,' said Snap promptly. 'Give 'em to me an' yu'll have 'em when yu want 'em. What's more, yu git a square deal, or someone'll go out in the smoke.'

'An' that goes,' shouted Larry and Dirty together, with a malignant glare at the Double X faction.

Green made no further demur, but handed his belt to Snap, who buckled it above his own in such a position as to enable him to pull the guns easily. Green threw aside his coat and vest, removed his spurs, and was ready. The centre of the room was soon cleared of tables and chairs, and the spectators, cards and drinks forgotten, stood round in an eager ring. Tarman also shed his coat and vest, disclosing a mighty pair of shoulders and arms upon which the muscles stood out in bunches. He moved easily for so big a man, and as he stepped forward swinging his hands he looked a formidable opponent. He was taller and heavier than the cowboy, but the latter was in perfect physical condition and as hard as nails. He smiled confidently as the little gunman whispered: 'Don't let him close with yu—he's too heavy, an' don't yu worry about anythin' but him; I'll look after the others.'

The cowpuncher nodded, aware that the advice was good. What the outcome of the fight would be he did not know, but the prospect of hammering the man before him made his body tingle and filled him with satisfaction. The primal instinct to fight with Nature's weapons possessed him, and he was glad it had not come to a shooting. A word from Snap and the combat was on.

Neither man knew much of boxing, and the ethics of pugilism were little observed in frontier encounters. It was to be a stark fight, with no respite and no mercy. There were no seconds and no referee, save the self-appointed, squinting-eyed little gunman who watched grimly, his hands never far from the butts of his guns.

For the first moment or two the men circled warily, watching for an opening. Tarman was the first to see what he took to be one, and rushing in, he swung a terrific blow at his opponent's head, which, had it landed, it might well have finished the battle. But the cowpuncher saw it in time and ducked, his shoulder taking what was meant for his head. Such was the force of the impact that he staggered and almost fell. A chorus of yells greeted this success.

Two to one on the big 'un,' shouted Blaynes, already visioning the downfall of the man he hated.

'Take yu—one hundred to fifty,' snapped Lunn.

'Good enough. Anyone else want it?' asked the foreman, his eyes on Larry and Dirty.

'Betcha life; we'll both take the same,' was the eager response of the Y Z pair.

Blaynes laughed. 'Yu boys'll put in a few months workin' for nothin',' he sneered.

Meanwhile the fight went on, Tannan trying to deliver another sledgehammer blow, and Green keeping him away with savage jabs from a straight left arm and clever footwork. These tactics, though they did little damage, had the effect of misleading the big man, and many of the onlookers.

'Smash him, Joe, he's runnin' away,' growled Laban.

Probably Tarman never heard the advice but he apparently thought the same, for he rushed blindly in. At once the smaller man ducked and, as the blow whistled harmlessly over his shoulder, drove his left to the body and his right to the jaw, with a force which jerked a gasp out of the recipient. Two quick body blows from fists as hard and heavy as bags of bullets followed, and ere the big man could retaliate Green had slipped clear and was waiting for him.

Again Tarman rushed in and this time Green met him halfway and fiercely returned blow for blow. Neither man made much attempt to avoid punishment; each was intent only on hurting the other. The cowpuncher, deaf to the curses and entreaties of his friends, yielded to the madness which possessed him, took all that was coming, and was concerned only with endeavouring to give more than he got. He was conscious of but one desire—to feel his fist pounding the puffed malignant face before him. He was hardly aware of the swaying ring of shouting men, grimed with the dust which rose in clouds from the boards beneath their stamping feet, but he knew that his strength would not stand the terrific strain much longer, and that his enemy was still unbeaten.

Tarman was weakening too. For months past he had been living an easy life, and the blows to the body were beginning to tell. After five minutes of straight slogging, Nature called a halt and the men fell apart, unsteady on their feet and gasping for breath. Both showed signs of the punishment they had received; Green's cheek was gashed and one eye nearly closed, while the big man's lips were split, and both eyes badly bruised. The respite did not last a minute, for Tarman, with a grunt of rage, lurched forward with fists flying. But the breathing-space, short as it was, enabled the cowboy to regain control of himself; his wild burst of anger was sated, and he now fought warily again.

Time after time he slipped agilely away from a furious onslaught, and the task of following him was doing the bigger man no good. The adherents of the latter saw this, but Green took no notice of the taunts and jeers his tactics called forth. All at once, the very thing he had been trying to avoid happened—his foot slipped, and in an instant Tarman's mighty arms were round his shoulders. It was like being hugged by a grizzly. Fortunately for Green, the giant had caught him a shade too high, so that he was still able to administer a succession of short-arm jabs to the wind, but the clamp of those iron arms was slowly but surely crushing the life out of him. The room seemed to be swaying up and down like the deck of a ship, he saw dimly a row of contorted, bobbing faces, oaths flew from excited lips, and the swinging lights seemed to be fading. Then, at the very moment when he felt that all was over, came relief; Tarman unable to endure the torture of the body-blows another instant, broke his hold and the pair dropped apart.

Silence seized the spectators again as they watched the two men standing there apparently too exhausted to make another move. Was it to be a drawn battle? Bruised, battered, drawing their breath in great sobs, neither man looked capable of striking another blow. The harsh tones of the Y Z foreman, bitter with hatred, shattered the silence and gave the signal for the renewal of the combat.

'Yu got him beat to a frazzle, Tarman. Go in an' kill the hound.'

Like a drench of cold water the words struck the cowboy, steadied his reeling senses, and keyed up his weary body. Snap, watching him closely, saw him straighten, noted how the slack fingers bunched themselves into fists again, and promptly replied to the challenge: 'Wantta double that bet, Blaynes?' he asked.

'Shore,' returned the foreman, 'though it's fair robbin' yu.' 'Guess yore conscience'll stand it at that,' sneered the other. 'Yo're on.' And then, in an undertone to Green, he said, 'Now, boy, wait for him an' give him hell.'

The cowpuncher did not have long to wait. Spitting out an oath, Tarman dashed in, his right arm swinging like a flail, intent on finishing the fight at a blow. But the smaller man was ready, alert, and watching. Instead of giving way before the onslaught he stepped to meet it and flinging his left arm upwards and outwards, knocked the advancing fist aside. The force of the parry swung the big man half round so that the left point of his jaw was towards his opponent. Like a flash of light Green's right fist shot out, with every ounce of his remaining

strength behind it, and landed with a thud on the exposed spot. Tarman's head snapped back, his heels left the floor, and he crashed down. Such was the impetus of the blow that the striker also fell prone on top of the stricken man.

Green was up again at once and stood back, waiting, but Tarman lay there like a log, breathing heavily, but unconscious; the fight was finished! For a moment the onlookers gazed in amazed silence at the fallen giant, and then pandemonium broke loose. Blaynes, furious at the loss of his money and his balked vengeance, was excitedly talking to the marshal, a point which Snap at once observed. It took but a minute to re-invest the victor with his gun-belt and discarded gear, and then the gunman whispered:

'They're hatchin' somethin'; make the back door.'

Almost unnoticed by the clamorous, wrangling crowd, Green, with Larry and Dirty, slid through the back entrance of the saloon and gained the hotel. Here, a little later, Snap and West joined them. The gunman was grinning.

'Blaynes was tryin' to get the marshal to arrest yu for disturbin' the peace, but he sorta reconsidered the notion when I pointed out that he'd have to jail Tarman to, an' that same feller come alive again just in time to take in the argument, an' well, yu oughta heard him; I reckon Tonk knows all about hisself now.'

'Point is, what're yu goin' to do, Don?' asked Larry.

Green smiled rather lopsidedly at his friend. 'I gotta bed here, an' I'm aimin' to occupy it a whole lot to-night,' he said. From this resolve all their arguments and entreaties failed to move him. Nor would he tell them anything regarding his future movements.

'It's mighty good o' yu boys to back me up, but I'm a lone wolf an' about as popular as a drink o' whisky at a temperance meeting; I ain't allowin' yu to get in worse than yu are. I'll be around, an' that's all I'm tellin' yu.'

With that they had to be content. But to Snap, when the other men had gone for the horses, he said, 'Snap, how long have yu known Tarman?'

Despite his habitual command of self, the gunman gave a slight start of surprise, for such a question had been totally unexpected. He was silent for a moment and then he said, 'That's one o' the things I can't tell yu, Green.'

It was the answer the puncher had looked for and he accepted it without further argument; right or wrong, the little man had his own code of honour, and Green was not the kind to ask him to go back on it.

As they rode home to the ranch the two younger cowboys were full of the fight, and the bulge they would have on those of the outfit who had not seen it. Snap was thoughtful, pondering on the last question.

'He's a noticin' cuss, for shore,' he unconsciously said aloud. 'He's a human clam, but Gosh! He can fight,' cried Dirty. 'All the same, I dunno as we oughtta left him.'

'Reckon he can take care of himself,' reassured Lunt, and smiled at a thought he did not impart to his companions.

CHAPTER XV

GREEN was down early next morning and having dealt with a satisfying breakfast, was watching the trail which led to the Y Z and wondering if Larry had managed to deliver the message he had charged him with. Presently his doubts were ended as he saw a familiar figure loping into the town. Noreen pulled up as the lounging puncher's hat swept from his head. The marks of the battle were plain to see, but there was a sardonic grin on his face as he looked up at her, and amusement in his tone as he said:

'I shore am a regular trouble-hunter, eh?'

'Larry said you wanted to see me,' she evaded.

'He can say that any time an' be tellin' the truth,' smiled the man. Then, dropping into gravity, he added, 'I'm wantin' yu to do me a kindness. It's about Blue—I dunno what to do with him; he's too good a hoss for the job I got in hand, I figured if yu would accept him' he paused awkwardly, and then, 'Yu see, I'd know he was in good hands.'

The girl's face paled a little as she realised his meaning, and at the same time it thrilled her to think that he wished her to have the animal he loved.

'You think you are in great danger?' she asked.

'Shucks, there I go a-scarin' yu most to death,' he said smilingly. 'A puncher's always in danger, more or less. The trouble is I can't leave the hoss here, an' I got nowhere to take him.'

'I'll keep him for you at the ranch,' she said. 'But you will have to get him there.'

He shook his head. 'Yu don't know Blue,' he said. 'Come along an' I'll introduce yu.'

At the hotel corral she dismounted and hitched her horse, while her companion undid the gate. The roan, with the several other occupants, promptly retreated to the far side of the enclosure. Green whistled and the roan pointed its ears but took no further notice. He whistled again, sharply, and the horse turned its head and then paced slowly towards him.

'Come here, yu old pirut; tryin' to play yu are a wild hoss again, eh?' admonished his master.

Reluctantly the animal came to his side, rolling a wicked eye on the girl. Green patted the sleek neck, pulled the quivering ears and then said: 'Stroke his muzzle; he won't hurt yu.'

Little as she fancied the task, Noreen did as she was bid, and to her surprise the animal made no attempt to bite her, though its lip lifted to show the powerful teeth which could have crushed her slender wrist in an instant.

'Now feed him this,' the puncher said, slipping some pieces of sugar into her hand.

Noreen did so, and the horse took it daintily and appeared to lose its nervousness. The girl laughed as she said, 'So horses are like their masters—it's a case of "Feed the brute."'

The cowboy laughed too. 'That ain't quite so. I reckon they are more like ladies; yu gotta be properly introduced. Now he knows yu, yu can ride him.'

'Really?' cried Noreen.

'Shore thing,' replied Green confidently. 'But yu will have to saddle him yoreself.'

He fetched her saddle and bridle, and the girl, wondering greatly, put them on the roan. Then she put her foot in the stirrup and swung up, fully expecting to be pitched headlong. But the roan, after the mildest attempt at a buck, settled down and trotted sedately round the corral. The girl cried out with delight; always she had wanted to ride this beautiful creature.

'It's just wonderful, but perhaps when you are not present—'

'No, he'll stay put, but don't let anybody else gamble with him. Yu can ride him back to the Y Z now, an' one o' the boys can fetch in yore pony. I'm shore obliged to yu for takin' him.'

'He'll be waiting for you when you come for him,' she said. 'What are you going to do? Why do you have to stay here and run such risks?'

The thought that she cared what became of him sent a spasm of joy through his being, but he had his poker face on and with the gravity of an Indian he replied:

'I gotta job, an' I ain't the on'y one that's takin' risks. S'long, Blue, be a good little hoss, an' mebbe I'll come an' see yu again.'

He rubbed the twitching nostrils and the horse nuzzled his hand, snapping at it playfully. The girl, herself a horse-lover, divined what the parting meant.

'Of course you will come and see us both again,' she said. 'And remember, he's still your horse.'

With a wave of her hand she rode out of the corral, and the man's eyes followed her. The approach of West cut short his meditations, and he looked up to find the one-time miner regarding him with patent disgust.

'Don't tell me yu've give that hoss away,' he said. 'The owner o' this travellers' palace said he was yourn.'

'I've done that very thing,' smiled Green. 'Had yore breakfast?'

'Breakfast don't look good to me this mornin',' was the rueful reply. 'I reckon I must be sufferin' from what the educated sharps call the "aftermouth" o' the night before. If yo're sot on comin' back with me, I'm ready to make a start.'

The puncher had nothing to wait for, and having paid their bills, they saddled up and departed. For the first hour California rode in silence, apparently deep in thought, stealing a covert glance at his companion from time to time. Presently he burst out.

'Hell, I can't do it. See here, Green, will yu take a pal's advice "in the dark," an' clear out o' this neck o' the woods?'

'There, Bullet, listen to that,' Green said whimsically to his pony. 'Ain't it astonishin' how unpopular we are? Everybody wants to see the last of us.'

'They'll see the last o' yu a damn sight sooner if yu stay around here,' retorted West. 'Well, I s'pose I gotta tell yu, but for the love o' Mike don't let on who put yu wise. Do yu know who that feller is that yu licked last night?'

'Calls himself Tarman,' Green said.

'Which may be his name for all I know, but I've generally heard him called "The Spider." Yu still aimin' to go back to his ranch?'

'I shore am,' was the quiet reply, and the other man swore disgustedly.

'Well, I had to warn yu, but it's yore funeral.'

'I'll try an' see than it ain't no such thing. Anyway the cards fall, I'm obliged to yu, an' yu can bet I'll be mighty silent.'

"S'allright," grunted West. 'Couldn't watch yu ridin' into a trap blindfold.'

No more was said. The cowpuncher well understood that the warning was all the information he would get. It had not much surprised him; he had already formed the opinion that Tarman had some sinister motive for visiting Hatchett's, and his speedy friendship with Poker Pete and his crowd was suggestive of a previous acquaintance. But what was Tarman's game? The running off of a few hundred head of cattle would not satisfy a man like him. The puncher worried over the problem, searching this and that way for a solution, while he rode steadily to put himself in the power of the man he had so thoroughly thrashed and humiliated.

To Joe Tarman, as to West, breakfast on the morning after his defeat made no appeal. He and Laban were almost the first customers at the Folly, the man who beat them to it being a little dried-up chap who had drifted into town the previous evening, driving an old burro packing a prospecting outfit. He watched the pair for a moment or two, noting the disgusted scowl on Tarman's swollen features, and then sidled along the bar until he was at Laban's elbow.

'Say, boss,' he whispered, 'does yore big friend know who he was up agin las' night? I gotta reason for askin'.'

'Cowpunch around here, named Green,' Seth replied.

'He he,' sniggered the old sinner. 'Dog my cats if it ain't just him to choose a name like that. Say, if I can tell yore friend how to a bit more than even the score, would it be worth a twenty, d'ye reckon?'

He had designedly raised his voice, and Tarman, who had been listening, pulled out his roll, peeled off a note and laid it on the bar.

'Spill the beans, an' if they're worth it, that's yores,' he growled.

'He, he,' cackled the aged one, 'it's mine shore enough. The feller yu fit, what calls hisself Green, he's Sudden.'

Tarman's face darkened. 'I found that out for myself,' he snarled, 'an' if yu think yu can jape with me, yu rat

The prospector backed away before the threatening gesture, 'I ain't japin'—I'm tellin' yu he's Sudden, the outlaw,' he cried. 'I've seen him three-four times in Texas an' Noo Mexico; I'd know him anywheres.'

'By God, he's right,' cried Tarman. 'Didn't I tell yu I'd met him, Seth? It's years ago, an' he was a mere pup then but it's him shore enough.'

He thrust the note into the informer's hands, motioned him away, and stood frowning heavily in thought. Gradually his face cleared until at length he laughed aloud and slapped Laban jovially on the shoulder.

'That's it,' he said. 'I've gon it, Seth, an' when I come to work it out, why, it's like takin' money from a blind man. No, it's too good to tell yu; watch my smoke. But keep this news behind yore teeth; I don't want no lynchin'-bee interferin' with my plans—yet.'

He strode over to the old prospector and held out another twenty dollar bill. 'Don't tell no one else about the damned feller,' he said. 'An' don't gamble with me, savvy?'

'I'm pullin' my freight from town right now,' said the gold-seeker, as he grabbed the bill and shuffled out of the bar.

The afternoon, Tarman, despite his damaged appearance, presented himself at the Y Z ranch-house. Laban had been told that he was not wanted. Old Simon received the visitor on the verandah, informing him that Noreen was out riding.

'That feller Green gave her back the roan this mornin' an' he seems to have taken the devil out o' the hoss,' Petter said. 'Odd number that; I can't make him out nohow.'

'He gave Miss Noreen that hoss?' cried the visitor. 'Whatever for?'

'Said he'd got no use for it,' replied. 'What do yu think?'

'Somethin' back o' that, I'll lay,' Tarman said. 'Say, I've got some news for yu 'bout that chap. He calls himself Green here, but he's betner known in a good many parts as Sudden, the outlaw.'

He leaned back in his chair to enjoy the surprise he knew his statement would produce and he was not disappointed. Old Simon was struck dumb, but only for a moment. Then he gasped: 'Yu shore o' that?'

'Shore as shootin'—I oughtta recognised him myself, but it's some time since I saw him.'

The cattleman jumped up. 'I'll call some o' the boys an' we'll get a rope on him right away,' he said, but Tarman did not move.

'Sit down,' he said. 'There's no hurry. He don't know he's been spotted an' I'm havin' him watched. 'Sides, he ain't aimin' to get away or he'd have kept that fast hoss. No, sir, he's in these parts for a purpose, an' I've got an idea that I know what it is'.

'Stealin' my cattle, blast him,' exploded the rancher.

Tarman regarded the angry man with a gleam of triumphant malice; things were going entirely right for him. 'That ain't nearly all he's after,' he said slowly. 'He wants yore cattle—yore ranch—yore daughter—and more.'

'My girl marry him—a murderin' cow-thief?' snarled Simon. 'Not while I can pull a trigger.'

'Huh! That ain't no way to talk. Yu may be fast with a gun but yu'd last 'bout as long as a snowflake in hell with him, an' be playin' into his hands at that.'

The old man looked up. 'Yu reckon he's after me?' he said.

Tarman did not make a direct reply to the question. 'See here,' he began, let me tell yu the story o' this feller Sudden, an' yu can judge for yoreself. Somethin' less than twenty year ago there was two fellers livin' down in Texas, 'bout half a day's ride from the so-called town o' Crawlins' Creek. They were both cattlemen, an' their ranges ran side by side, with p'raps twenty miles between the ranch-houses, an' they got to be pretty close friends, havin' a good deal in common. Both had lost their wives early, an' each of 'em had one kid. Peterson's was a boy, an' Evesham's a girl several years younger, an' to the fathers there warn't no other kids in the world.'

The narrator paused for a moment, his keen, cruel eyes dwelling on the figure slumped in the

chair before him. He had not failed to notice the start the old man had been unable to conceal at the mention of the names. He hid his own satisfaction, and continued :

'After a while, however, there come trouble over water rights which both claimed, an' things got so bad a-tween 'em that for over a year they never spoke, an' gripped their guns when they met. Then one day Peterson's son vanished, an' he let it be known pretty plain that he thought Evesham had stolen the kid out o' spite! But he couldn't prove nothin' an' though he spent six months searchin' the lad was never heard of. Then Peterson sold out an' took the trail, tellin' nobody where he was bound for, an' a month later, Evesham's little girl disappeared an' was never traced. Odd, warn't it?'

The drooping figure in the chair made no reply, and Tarman continued his story with a half sneer on his lips.

'Evesham went near mad. For months he hunted Peterson, swearing to shoot him on sight, but his former neighbour had vanished as completely as the kids. At last he gave up the search an' resumed his life on the ranch. Some years later, Evesham's in town when along comes an old Injun, trailin' a string o' ponies for sale, an' with him there's his squaw an' a half-breed boy. Evesham takes a fancy to the lad, buys him an' takes him back to his ranch. That boy is the feller yu know as Green, an' I know as Sudden, the outlaw.'

The owner of the Y Z looked up at last. 'An' Bill Evesham, what's come of him?' he asked huskily, and Tarman smiled as he replied :

'Did I say his name was Bill? Well, it was anyways. He cashed 'bout three years ago, an' when the adopted son come to clean up there was nothin' for him, the old man had gambled an' drunk the ranch away. The boy, he was growed up then, o' course, went on the cross; a wizard with hosses an' weapons, he couldn't hold a steady job. Several fellers tried to beat him to the draw an' paid the penalty. He got a reputation but it's one that keeps him movin', an' my idea is there's some purpose back o' that; he may be lookin' for somebody. What do yu think—Peterson?'

The old man jumped as though he had received an electric shock, but one glance at the inexorable, triumphant face of the man before him showed the futility of denial, and he sank back wearily into his chair. Discovered after all these years of security! For a vain second, he contemplated snatching out his gun and destroying the man who had surprised his secret, and Tarman read his thought.

'Don't try nothin' rash, Peterson,' he advised. 'I'm yore friend, an' we'll see this out together.'

'Then drop that Peterson racket—my name's Petter,' said Simon irritably. 'For the rest of it, I'll own up that yu've got the story pretty straight. An' don't yu get the idea that I'm sorry any; Bill Evesham double-crossed me, I reckon, an' I'd do the same again. He warn't the forgivin' sort either, an' it would be just like him to set this murderin' hound on my trail. Green as good as told Norry so soon after he come, though neither of 'em knows how close he was to the man he was after, an' I warn't shore. Point is, what are we goin' to do?'

He was recovering his poise; the old pioneer spirit which had enabled him to face danger and disaster unflinchingly defied the weakening influence of age, and Tarman knew that he would fight like a wounded grizzly for the girl he had come to regard as his own, and the loss of whose affection he feared more than the threat of death.

'Yu can leave Green to me,' he said deliberately. 'I'm figurin' that if we let him run on the rope for a bit he'll hang himself. He don't know yet that yo're the man he's lookin' for so there's no danger thataway. You can tell the girl who he is, but yu ain't aimin' to let her know all the story, are yu?'

'No,' said Simon explosively. 'She's been my daughter all these years an'...'

'I reckon yo're right,' Tarman agreed. 'Women are queer an' she might take it all wrong. What's a name anyways; she'll be changin' it soon, I hope.'

The old man looked up sharply and met the smiling expressive eyes of the other. 'Meanin'?' he asked.

'That I want her, yes,' came the plain answer. 'I ain't a poor man, Petter, an' there's no strings tied to me. Yu got any objections?'

Simon was silent for a few moments, considering. He had, of course, expected some such development; he knew perfectly well that the big man had not visited the ranch so often on his account, but now the moment was come he found a difficulty in deciding. He knew nothing against the suitor, and yet—

'Not if Norry ain't,' he said presently. 'She's the doctor.' 'Then that'll be all right,' Tarman rejoined. 'Now don't yu worry none about Green; we'll have him where the hair's short before he knows it:

'What yu aimin' to do when yu get him? String him up?' Tarman laughed and shook his head. 'We'll let the Governor do that,' he said. 'There's ten thousand dollars in all offered for the capture of Mister Sudden. I could use that money—it would make a decent settlement for a bride, for instance. Well, that's all arranged, an' I'm agoin' to take the trail before Noreen blows in—I ain't very presentable.'

Long after his visitor had gone Old Simon sat in his chair smoking and pondering on the past. So Bill Evesham had gone, but not without rearing someone to carry on his vengeance; he could figure him deliberately adopting and training the half-breed lad for that very purpose. And Norry, what would she think of it all? She must condemn him, of course, for a cruel and animal act which had robbed both her father and herself. Would affection for him survive such a blow? He did not know and would not take the risk if he could avoid it.

His thoughts turned to Tarman. Somehow, he did not like the man and yet he could not have given a reason. But he recognised that he was in need of him and in his power, a reflection which made him curse softly, for Old Simon was an independent soul, and preferred, as he put it, to 'cut his own trail.' He was still brooding in the chair when Noreen returned from her ride, and the sight of her flushed face, and the lilt of her laugh, made him set his teeth and swear that Fate itself should not wrest her from him.

'Had a good ride?' he asked, as she came swinging up from the corral.

'Ripping,' she replied. 'Blue behaved like a perfect angel. Mr. Green must be a wizard.'

'Mebbe he is, but yu better give over callin' him Mr. Green,' retorted the old man grimly.

'He's better known down South as Sudden—the outlaw.'

The information wiped the colour from the girl's face, and her voice shook as she asked, 'Is that true, or just town talk?'

'True enough, I reckon, but it ain't generally known, an' I don't want it should be,' replied the cattleman meaningly. 'I ain't made up my mind what to do yet.'

'But what is he doing here, and why did he give me the roan?' asked the girl.

'Well, he's rustlin' cattle for one thing, an' as for the hoss, he can get him back next time he raids the ranch,' the told man said bitterly.

'I suppose Mr. Tarman brought the news,' Noreen guessed, and when her father nodded, she went on, 'I don't believe he's an ounlaw, and if he is, I don't think he would raid the Y Z, so there. One thing I'm quite sure of, if Mr. Green had been beaten last night he wouldn't be going around spreading scandal about his opponent.'

'But, Norry,' protested Petter, 'this ain't scandal. Green was recognised by a feller who knew him in Texas. Tarman was on'y warnin' me, an' come up a-purpose to do it. Yu gotta be fair.'

'I'm going to be—to both sides,' the girl retorted. 'I want more proof than mere hearsay, Daddy; he didn't seem that kind of man.'

She turned and went into the house. Old Simon, staring after her in perplexity, shook his

head. 'Women has me beat every way from the jack,' he muttered. 'Tell 'em a man's a wrong 'un an' they either won't believe it, or they get more interested. Yu can't out-guess 'em nohow.'

CHAPTER XVI

THE battered condition of the new hand on his return to the Crossed Dumb-bell aroused a curiosity which he left to West to satisfy, merely stipulating that the identity of his opponent be concealed. California agreed that this was sound policy, and excelled himself in a vivid, denailed description of the battle, but giving no particulars which might point to the personality of the beaten man. But old Jeffs, sitting at the head of the table, smiled cunningly once or twice, and Green divined that he had guessed.

The other men had apparently no suspicion, their attitude seemed to be simply one of brutish approval for the victor. Among the most interested of the listeners was one Green had not seen before, a dwarf in height, with a huge barrel of a body and absurd little bowed legs which seemed utterly inadequate for its support. A great shaggy head with coarse features, and arms which could reach almost to the tiny knees, completed an appearance which justified the freak's nickname of 'Gorilla.'

This creature, who had been following the story of the fight with impatient interest, now shot a question at Green: 'Say, stranger, d' yu ever come acrost a smaller cowpunch than me?' The query came in the truculent tone so frequently adopted by the small man who is sensitive regarding his stature and West's eyes flashed a warning.

'Shore I have. Back on my old ranch in Texas there was a feller named "Tiny" who would have looked a kid beside yu, an' he was a blame good puncher too,' smiled Green. 'It's a fact, boys, that feller was so short that when he had a pain he couldn't tell whether it was toothache or corns.'

A chorus of laughter greeted the humorous exaggeration and the dwarf's booming voice joined in.

'Haw, haw,' he bellowed. 'Reckon he musta bin real small, that feller, but size ain't anythin'. I'm none so big m'self, yet I bin in a fight with fists an' the chap was damn near twice as tall as me.' He looked round and grinned triumphantly at the surprise his statement created, and then went on, 'Yessir, I ain't joshin' neither. We had a sorter argument an' agreed to settle with our hands 'stead o' shootin', him claimin' there was more of him to aim at. Then some o' the boys allowed that to make it fair he orta fight on his knees, with me standin' up, an' that's how we done. We scrapped for nigh half an hour an' in the end I knocked him cold. Anybody here wantta take me on the same terms?'

He squinted at Green as he threw out the challenge and then his eyes roved round the company. The Y Z puncher laughed and replied good-humouredly :

'Not any for me, thank yu. I had a full meal o' scrappin' last night; I ain't a hog.'

The other men seemed to accept the dwarf's offer as a joke, sprung for the benefit of the newcomer. The enormous muscular power of that stunted body was known to all. The foreman clinched the discussion by saying sharply: 'Draw in yore horns, Gorilla; we gotta job comin' along that'll need all the sound men we can muster.'

'Aw, Jeffs, there won't be no trouble,' protested the dwarf. 'Yu can see I got 'em all razzle-dazzled—scared of a little 'un.'

In an instant the foreman's face changed from calm to snorm. His eyes flashed fire, and snatching out his gun, he cried, 'One more yap from yu an' it will be yore finish. Yu know me.'

The pugnacious one subsided into his seat like a pricked bubble, and Jeffs, with a savage glare round the room, went out. The scene, begun in a farcical mood, had nearly ended in red

tragedy.

'Yu want to go slow with Jeffs, Gorilla,' admonished West. 'He on'y warns a man once, an' not allus that.'

The stunted man did not reply; the tempest he had so suddenly raised had routed his not over-keen faculties, and he was still in a kind of daze.

'Would he have killed him?' Green whispered to West.

'Shore thing,' replied the other. 'I saw him do it once. Yu see, this is a tough crowd an' he's gotta ride 'em all the time.'

'What's the job he spoke of?'

'Ain't a notion—first I've heard of it. We'll all know soon, I guess.'

The next day was occupied with the ordinary work of the ranch, but on the following morning preparations for some expedition began. Horses were brought in and carefully examined, weapons were cleaned, and ropes looked at. There was an air of general excitement, the meaning of which Green did not discover until the foreman called him aside, and with a leering look, told him the news.

'Chance to git yore own back a bit to-night, Green,' he said, watching with narrowed eyes.

'We're aimin' to lift some o' the Y Z stock. Yu'll be along.'

The puncher's face told him nothing. 'Why not?' came the cool retort. 'I'm workin' for yu, an' they treated me mean. I don't owe the Y Z nothin' but a grudge.'

'Well, here's where yu pay it,' smiled the other. 'We start this afternoon.'

Left to himself, Green pondered on the situation; there were points he could not understand. Jeffs, of course, had received orders from Tarman, but why was the latter robbing the ranch he must surely be expecting to possess one day, for the cattle, once stolen, were the general property of the gang. Again, so far as he could judge, he had been the last to be told, even West having said nothing of the projected raid. This might be a natural precaution on the part of the foreman, who could not be sure of Green's real feelings towards his old ranch. Certainly he had made it impossible for the Y Z man to send any warning unless he deserted altogether, and Green guessed his movements were being watched. Was it a trap for himself? Looking at it every way he could find no solution, and at length, with a shrug of his shoulders, he decided that there was nothing to be done but go through with it. West provided another disquieting factor.

'No, I ain't goin'—I gotta keep house,' he said, regret in his tone, and then in a whisper, he added, 'Somethin's in the wind—I dunno what, but yu better watch out. Jeffs is goin' this time an' that ain't usual.'

Green was sorry that the talkative one was not to be of the party, for not only was he good company, but the Y Z puncher felt that he could depend on him for help in a tight place. Warped as he undoubtedly was, he had laws of his own, and with the man who had saved him from a horrible death, he would play straight.

Ten men, well-mounted and fully armed, composed the raiding force, which set out early in the afternoon, headed for the Y Z. The trail taken was the one by which West had brought Green to the rustlers' headquarters. With plenty of time at their disposal the men rode easily, smoking and chatting in pairs. Green, indifferent as to whom he rode with, found himself companioned by Gorilla, perched on the back of a big, raw-boned pony, with a hammer head and a general lack of beauty thoroughly in keeping with its rider. The dwarf grinned at the bigger man as he ranged alongside, and noted the disparaging glance at his mount.

'Shore, he ain't much to look at, but he's wise to cattle an' he'll run till he drops,' he said, with an odd note of pride in his rumbling voice.

'Yu don't have to tell me,' responded Green. 'hosses is where I live.'

'Yes, an' yu gotta good 'un,' said Gorilla.

'Bullet's a useful animal,' agreed Green, patting his pony's neck.

'I wasn't meanin' him; what about yore other hoss, the roan...' he stopped suddenly, and with some confusion added, 'Huh, reckon I'm tanglin' yu up with some other feller. Well, anyways, it don't matter now.'

With which cryptic remark he relapsed into silence, merely favouring the puncher with an occasional side-glance and a sort of half-grin containing an element of malicious mirth. Here was more food for thought; these men evidently knew more about him than he had suspected. Why had the little man chopped his remark short? Had he been on the point of revealing something? And why didn't it matter now? These questions kept the cowpuncher's mind fully occupied until the band reached the hidden valley, where he had to dismount and help the others adjust the board gangway for the horses. As this was made much wider and stronger, and left in position, it was evident that the stolen herd was to be brought oack that way.

At the hut in the valley a rest and a meal were taken and Jeffs gave his final instructions. The men were told off to work in pairs and Green had Gorilla assigned to him as partner. Then loose boards in the floor of the hut were lifted, and from the cavity beneath a number of Indian head-dresses were dragged. These were donned and some of the men even daubed their faces with stain and 'painted Injun.' Then, with a whild whoop, several sprang out and gave a creditable display of an Apache war-dance, while the rest looked on and applauded.

'Big Chief, "Wart-on-a-horse," him dance too,' yelled one, and slung Gorilla into the cavorting ring round the fire. Anything more ludicrous than the dwarf's great body, with eagle plumes streaming down the back, balanced on tiny legs trying to keep step with the others, could hardly be conceived, and the spectacle aroused shouts of laughter. Jeffs, however, soon put a stop to the merriment with the order to mount.

It was growing dark when they passed through the tunnel at the lower end of the valley and made their way down nhe stream. The men rode in pairs and the foreman had named the order; Green and his partner were the middle couple, and the cowpuncher could not believe that this was accidental. Moreover, Gorilla stuck to him like a burr, and he had an uneasy suspicion that the little man was riding with his gun drawn, and that he would be instantly shot down if he made a dash for it. They rode slowly, for in the dark the trail was difficult, and Jeffs wished to spare the horses. Mile after mile they paced through the darkness, amid a silence broken only by the creak of saddle-leather, the clink of a shod hoof on a stone, a laugh or an oath from one of the riders. At times the heavy foliage shut them in completely, but when threading a gully or crossing a ridge they could see the sky, ablaze with the twinkling lights of other worlds.

Several times Green endeavoured to draw his companion into converse but the dwarf replied only in monosyllables. He had the air of one who has nearly committed an indiscretion and is taking no more risks. So the Y Z man was driven to his own thoughts, and into these a laughing face, with rebellious golden hair, insisted upon intruding. He found himself wishing he could see her, but would have been sadly shocked had he known how soon his desire was to be gratified.

So far as Green could determine, the trail they were traversing was that he and Larry had followed, skirting Sandy Parlour, and striking the Y Z range near the line-house where Bud had been slain. A plainsman, travelling a new trail, instinctively picks out landmarks which, retained in the memory, will enable him to recognise it again; the contour of a bluff, the bed of an old water-course, a big tree, or even a particular clump of brush, serve him as signposts.

So that the cowpuncher knew when they were nearing their destination, and was moved to comment on the lack of caution shown by the raiders.

'Shucks, they ain't expectin' us,' said Gorilla.

'Yu mean they are expectin' us, don't yu?' queried the other. 'Who's at the line-house to-night?'

'Bent an' Nigger,' replied the dwarf unthinkingly, and then, with a sudden oath, 'Here, what yu gettin' at? How do I know who..'

The puncher interrupted him. 'Why not?' he asked easily. 'I reckon Jeffs ain't the man to overlook a bet like that. Yu gotta suspicious nature, Gorilla.'

'Mebbe I have, but don't yu play no tricks on me,' came the sullen retort.

They were now in a little draw which sloped up on to the open range, and Jeffs called a halt while one of the men slipped from his saddle and vanished in the shadows. Evidently the leader of the expedition was taking no chances, and wished to be sure that the men he looked for were actually in the cabin. The rest of them waited, in silence now, for the return of the scout. Green covertly tried his guns, making sure they would instantly come from the holsters, and then, pressing his horse with his right leg, caused the animal to gradually edge further away from Gorilla. The latter at once imitated the movement, growling in an undertone, 'We gotta keep together, pard.'

The puncher did not reply; he had found out what he wanted to know—that he was not trusted. Doubtless, he argued, he had been included in the party as a test; if, indeed, he was willing to rob his late employer, they would know that he was one of them, but they would take no risks till this was proved. His own plans were not yet matured, he was not ready to put his cards on the table, for he had no evidence of Tarman's connection with the rustlers other than his own knowledge.

The reappearance of the man who had gone ahead cut short his meditations. Apparently the coast was clear, for the leader gave the word and the raiders advanced through the draw to emerge on the open range. Then, in accordance with the orders already given, four of the couples spread out right and left in a wide half-circle, while Jeffs and another man headed for the line-house, the one small window of which was lighted up. Noiselessly loping over the thick grass, the outer horns of the half-circle of horsemen swept round to complete the ring, and then, at the shrill cry of a coyote, which was the agreed signal, all rode slowly towards the centre, driving in the cows. A few of the brutes tried to dodge past the riders, but the cow-ponies knew their work and soon had the fugitives turned back into the bunch. In less than an hour the gather was made, and Jeffs rode up to find a goodly herd of six or seven score awaiting him.

'Get 'em on the move, boys,' he said. 'We don't want no daylight in this act.'

The men laughed and set about the task of getting the milling herd on the run. Green was taking a hand in this when a squat, leering rider slipped up behind and dealt him a crashing blow on the head with the barrel of a six-shooter. The stricken man went headlong from the saddle, and the frightened pony sprang away into the darkness before the assailant could grip the reins. With a chuckle of triumph the dwarf looked down upon the sprawling black figure, with its garish plumed head-dress.

'Reckon yu'll stay put for a bit, but yo're damn lucky,' he muttered. 'I'd 'a' put a knife in yore gizzard but Jeffs wouldn't have it; swore he'd blow me apart if I killed ye, an' he'd do it too, blast him.'

Without another look at his victim, the cold-blooded little freak turned his horse and galloped after the retreating raiders.

In the first chill of the early morning, a cowboy loped easily over the plain in the direction of the line-house. It was Durran, and his eyes gleamed as he noted the almost entire absence of cattle.

'Seems they made a pretty clean sweep,' he muttered. 'Hell, what's that?'

He had caught sight of the Indian head-dress and in a moment was gazing down at it, a sinister grin on his lips. 'So they got him, eh?' he continued, 'an' got him good by the look of it. Well, that'll put a crimp in yu, Mister Man.'

He spurred his mount to the cabin, sprang down and thrust open the door. At the sight which greeted him he leant against the doorpost and rocked with laughter. Bent and Nigger, hog-nosed and helpless, lay sprawling on the floor. A simultaneous curse from both cut short his merriment.

'Come an' ease off these ropes an' stop yore jackass bray,' supplemented Nigger. 'Jeffs shore knows all about knots, blast him.'

Durran slashed them loose with his knife, still chuckling, and the bound men stood up and chafed their aching limbs. 'Glad yu fellers had this end of it,' commented their rescuer. 'Just a mite unnecessary, warn't it?'

'No, it warn't,' replied Bent. 'Jeffs aims to play safe. S'pose one o' the other boys, or some o' the Frying Pan outfit had sifted in before yu, how's it goin' to look for us? An' he shore did a good job, cuss him.'

'Green's a-layin' out there,' Durran said, jerking his thumb towards the open door. 'Looks like he's cashed.'

'Cashed nothin'—just a tap with a gun,' said Bent. 'I did that when they first rushed us.'

'Yu did?' ejaculated Durran, and then suddenly comprehending, 'Why, o' course, it musta been one o' yu. Ain't it hell how neat it's workin' out, an' won't Rattler be pleased to see him?'

'He'll be a gladder sight than four aces; reckon we'd better fetch him in.'

Green was still unconscious when they laid him in one of the bunks, and having removed his guns and tied his feet together, began to bathe the gash on his head. Under their ministrations he came to his senses but it was some little time before he could realise what had happened. Then he began to get a glimmering of the trap which had been so artfully prepared, and into which he had blundered blindly.

After a meal Durran rode off again to carry the news to the ranch. The other two men sat at the door conversing in low tones, and taking no notice of the prisoner. The reflections of the latter were the reverse of pleasant. He was in a tight place, caught in the act of rustling, and by the custom of the country the nearest tree and a rope would be his portion when the foreman of the Y Z arrived. His one chance lay in being taken to the ranch and having speech with Simon, and he doubted whether Blaynes would give him that opportunity. Lying there, his head throbbing painfully, he suddenly became aware that the voices from the doorway were louder, and he could hear something of what was said.

'The Y Z first an' then the Frying Pan,' said Bent. 'The Spider ain't no small thinker, I reckon.'

'An' with him out o' the way things'll go a-hummin',' put in Nigger, and Green guessed that the reference was to himself. 'Dunn why, but I allus suspected that feller.'

'Same here,' agreed his friend. 'Well, he won't trouble none of us soon, though it seems almost a pity to rub out a chap as can lick the Spider in a fist fight, don't it?'

'Shucks, he musta been lucky.'

'Mebbe, but I saw him lay out Rattler an' there warn't no luck about that eepisode, believe me.'

'Yeah, an' Rattler ain't forgot it, so I guess yu don't have to worry,' said Nigger. 'We better have a look at the tracks them damn rustlers left.'

He heard them laugh and go for their horses. They knew their prisoner was secure, for not only was he bound but he had no horse to get away on. The captive also realised the futility of thoughts of escape, and with the philosophy of a man who has been in desperate circumstances before, he awaited events. He was, in fact, asleep when the foreman, accompanied by the Y Z outfit, arrived in the afternoon. Rattler's eyes, as they rested on the bound man in the bunk, betrayed venomous satisfaction.

'Just what I allus thought,' he sneered. 'Got yu with the goods, too. Well, we ain't no time to waste. Fetch him along an' pick out a good rope.'

But the foreman was taking too much for granted. His party included Snap, Larry, Dirty, and Simple, and when the prisoner saw them grouped together he wished he had not been so tight-mouthed about his plan of campaign. He need not have worried, for the foreman's order had no sooner been uttered than Lunt stepped forward.

'Hold yore horses, Blaynes,' he said quietly. 'There ain't goin' to be no hangin' here.'

The foreman whirled on him, his features twisted with rage. Snap returned his glare through slitted eyes, contemptuously, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt, but all there knew that he was ready, and that his opponent's first move would in all probability be also his last. Blaynes knew it too, and had recourse to bluster.

'How long yu been in charge o' this outfit?' he stormed. 'An' where'd yu get yore authority to countermand my orders?' 'Takin' them questions as they come, I've been in charge ever since I joined the outfit,' sneered Lunt. 'An' as for authority, well, what's the matter with these?' and he swept the tips of his fingers over the black butts of his guns.

Blaynes would have given ten years of his life for the power to snatch out his weapon, but he knew he could not do it. Had it been any other man in the outfit he would not have hesitated, but this grim bow-legged little puncher was a chilly proposition; the squinting, mocking eyes told that he would shoot to kill, and was hungering for the opportunity. Rattler preferred to temporise.

'See here, Snap, what in hell's got into yu?' he asked. 'This feller's a rustler, playin' Injun to steal our cattle and caught with the goods. 'Sides which, he's a damn sneakin' spy. What yu takin' his end for?'

Snap grinned. He knew perfectly well that this appeal was made, not to him, but to any other of the men who might take his side.

He replied promptly: 'Mebbe he's all yu say, an' mebbe he ain't, but he's agoin' back to the ranch for the Old Man to decide. It ain't yore cattle that's missin' anyways. There's four of us thinks like this, an' if yu others wants argue about it yu can turn yore wolf loose as soon as yo're ready.'

The foreman stood irresolute; the odds were heavily in his favour so far as numbers were concerned, but a fight would mean wiping out some of the outfit, and he knew he would be the first to die; Snap would take care of that. Moreover, he had the same orders as Gorilla, though he had been prepared no chance that to compass his revenge. He glanced at Durran and the scowling face gave him no encouragement. He must give in.

'I don't want no gun-play 'mong ourselves, but I'm not forgettin' it,' he said. 'We'll let him

live long enough to get to the Y Z, where I reckon the Old Man'll string him up slick enough. Durran, yu an' Nigger take him in.'

Snap climbed his horse. 'I'll go along,' he said sardonically. 'He's a desperate feller. Yu better get a move on, Rattler, if yu don't want them rustlers to git away with the plunder.'

Blaynes ground his teeth with rage at the position the gunman had forced him into. His apparent duty to his employer would send him on a will-o'-the-wisp chase of cattle he had no wish to recapture, while his one desire was to go back to the ranch to make sure the prisoner did not escape or receive mercy. The very thought of the latter possibility decided the issue. 'Aw right, we'll all go back,' he said. 'If Simon wants his cattle again he'll have to get me some fellers as will obey orders.'

The prisoner, his hands still bound, was hoisted upon a horse, and his feet secured beneath the animal's belly. Then with Durran and Bent on either side, and Blaynes immediately behind, they set out for the ranch. Thus Green was given no chance of converse with his friends, but the thought that they had not yet condemned him in spite of his apparent guilt was a cheering one. He smiled reassuringly at Larry, whose face showed most concern, and who appeared to be holding himself in with difficulty. He felt that the boy was loyal and would stand by him to the end.

It was growing dark when they reached the ranch-house, and the early stars were winking in the sky. Blaynes gave a hail as the riders pulled their mounts down in front of the verandah, and Simon promptly appeared, followed by Noreen. The cattle-owner had already been told of the raid, but Blaynes had not mentioned that one of the thieves had been taken, and for a moment he did not notice the bound man.

'Yore soon back, Blaynes,' he said. 'How's that?'

The foreman told his story, truthfully enough, but saddling the whole blame for not following the stolen herd upon the rebellious members of the outfit. Old Simon's face grew stormy as he listened, and when the tale was done he turned to Lunt, who with the other three was standing apart.

'An' what's yore idea, Lunt, takin' sides with a cow-thief against me?' he asked.

'That ain't so, Simon,' replied the gunman. 'If it had been, we'd 'a' turned Green loose, an' we could have.' His voice had an edge to it. 'Rattler an' the prisoner ain't never been the best o' friends, an' hangin' him right away looked too much like settlin' a private quarrel in a mean way to me. Any feller is entitled to a hearin' an' by God, Green is goin' no have one.'

'Yu threatenin' me?' snarled Simon.

'Nary a threat, but I'm tellin' yu,' replied the little man. His voice was low, passionless, but there was an earnestness which could not be mistaken. Little as he liked being dictated to the ranch-owner realised that he must give in or blood would be shed. He looked at the prisoner.

'Well, Green, yore friends are doin' all the talkin'; ain't yu got nothin' to say?' he sneered.

'What I have to say is for yore ear only,' Green said. 'When yu have heard it yu can go ahead with the hangin'—if yu want to.' Blaynes laughed, and the puncher went on, 'Yore dirty dog of a foreman don't want that; he didn't follow yore stolen cows because he was scared I'd get a chance to speak with yu—least-ways, that was one o' the reasons. Now, yu can please yoreself; I'm through.'

'He's a rank liar,' Blaynes cried.

'It's easy to call a tied man that,' Green gibed. 'Turn me loose an' yu'll see that coyote hunt his hole.'

'Huh, damn lot o' fuss about stringin' up a thief,' interjected Durran. 'Anybody'd think there warn't no trees handy.'

'Keep yore mouth shut, or I'll close it for yu—permanent,' snapped Larry.

`Stop yore gassin'—all o' yu darn fools,' yelled the exasperated cattlemen, and then, as he felt a touch on his arm, `Well, girl, what do yu want? No good yu mixin' up in this.'
`I'm only saying this, Dad. Why not listen to Green; that can't do any harm.'
The old man pondered for a moment. `Mebbe yo're right,' he said at last. `Green, yu come into the office. The rest o' yu can clear out.' Blaynes started to dismount, but Simon saw the movement. `I don't want yu, Rattler,' he added.
`But see here, Simon, if this feller is goin' to make charges against me, I oughtta be presenn,' protested the foreman. `Who told yu he's agoin' to?'
`Well, it seems the likely move, don't it?' said Blaynes, rather taken aback by his employer's manner.
`Awright, if he does, I won't hang yu without givin' yu a chance to speak for yoreself,' snapped Simon. `Now git.'

He followed the captive into the office, and found his daughter already there. He looked at her doubtfully and then said, `I don't remember askin' yu to be present, Norry.'
`You didn't, Dad, but I'm going to be,' she replied, and there was a quiet determination in her voice which made both men look at her. The laughing merry girl had gone and a grown serious woman had taken her place. The old man made a gesture of impatience.
`It ain't no business for a girl,' he protested.
`It's your business and therefore mine,' came the reply. `Besides, I am in this man's debt and I'm not forgetting it.'
`Huh,' grunted the ranch-owner. `Reckon he's paid himself for that out o' my cattle, but have it yore own way. Now, Green, yu got that hearin', make the most of it.'

The prisoner did not at once avail himself of the invitation. Standing there with bound hands, unshaven, and with a bloodstained, dirty bandage on his head, he was painfully conscious that he looked a ruffian. Although the fact that she took even the slightest interest in him, due only to a sense of gratitude, stirred him, he would have preferred to speak to her father alone. Though his investigations were by no means complete he felt that he had discovered enough to convince the ranchman. `When I left the Y Z I told yu I wasn't ready to put my cards on the table,' he began. `Well, I ain't ready now, but the prospect of havin' his neck stretched forces a man's hand some...' he smiled grimly, `an' I'm agoin' to do it.'
`Go ahead,' said Simon, shortly.
`I told yu the rustlin' was the work of whites playin' Injun an' I was right,' proceeded Green. `That warn't difficult,' sneered the old man, with a glance at the head-dress found on the prisoner, which Blaynes had handed to him.
`No, the signs were plain enough,' returned the puncher, ignoring the sneer. `What wasn't so plain was that yu were bein' robbed by a big gang, and that yore foreman an' more than half yore outfit are in it.'
`That ain't plain now,' commented the cattlemen, drily.
`I've already said that I'm speakin' before I'm ready,' the prisoner pointed out. `I ain't got all the proof I want, but I know what I'm tellin' yu. The Double X an' the Crossed Dumbell are workin' with some o' yore men, liftin' cattle from yu an' the Frying Pan, an' the whole bunch is bossed by a feller they call the Spider. It was the Crossed Dumb-bell outfit that raided yu last night an' I was one of 'em, an' let me tell yu, it wasn't Bent who kicked me cold but one o' the gang I'd ridden there with.'
`Why should they do that?' demanded Simon.
`Mebbe they suspected me or mebbe it was a bit o' private spite,' replied Green. `Anyways, it wasn't either o' yore men—they never showed themselves.'
`Yu seen this boss, the Spider?' asked Simon.

'Yes, he calls himself Tarman in Hatchett's,' replied Green.

The announcement hardly produced the effect he had looked for. Noreen's eyes certainly met his in startled surprise, but her father flung himself back in his chair with a shout of laughter, while Green and the girl watched him in amazement.

'Well, well, if that don't beat the hand,' he gasped, as he struggled to control his mirth. 'That was a poor shot o' yores, my lad. O' course, yu don't know that Tarman has offered to put fifty thousand dollars into this ranch on the day he marries my daughter. Now, what yu gotta say about that?'

Green's eyes narrowed. 'That he'll find it easier to put the money in if he takes it out first,' he retorted. 'Tarman's out to get this ranch an' the Frying Pan by hook or by crook.'

'An' he's robbin' the ranch he's willin' to buy into, an' the father of the girl he's hopin' to marry, eh?' sneered Simon. 'Sounds likely, don't it?'

'I gotta damit that it don't,' the cowpuncher agreed. 'There is ends to this tangle I ain't picked up yet, an' yu mustn't forget that there's others in the game who want a pickin'. Poker Pete, Dexter, an' yore foreman ain't the sort to work for nothin'.'

The ranch-owner smiled sardonically. 'An' yu are, I s'pose? When yu come siftin' round these parts all yu wanted was a job at forty a month, warn't it? A job that would leave yu free to work with yore friends at stealin' my cows. An' I fell for it with my eyes shut, but they're open now, Mister Rustler, an' I don't swallow no more o' yore lies.'

His voice rose as he delivered this tirade, and his eyes glared malignantly at the bound man before him, who listened unmoved. It was Noreen who spoke:

'Daddy,' she murmured, reprovingly.

'Yu keep quiet, girl,' replied her father. 'This feller may have pulled the wool over yore eyes too, but this is where he gets trimmed.' Turning to Green, he continued. 'Yu have had the laugh over me so far; we'll see whether yu find it so damn funny to-morrow mornin' when I turn yu over to the marshal, an' tell him that yo're Sudden, the outlaw. Ha! That touches yu, don't it?'

For with all his self-control, the prisoner had not been able to suppress a start of surprise at this unexpected accusation, a movement which, slight as it was, did not escape the eyes of the man who had been looking for it.

'P'raps yu would like to deny that too?' sneered the cattleman. 'Feller with yore gifts oughtta be able to think up a good explanation.'

The prisoner forced a grin to his lips and shrugged his shoulders. 'Shucks,' he said. 'I reckon yu take the pot this time, but yo're playin' in a deeper game than yu guess, an' I'm warnin' yu that the cards is stacked.'

'Well, yu don't need to worry—yore hand is played,' was the ironical retort. 'Now yu come with me an' I'll put yu in a safe place for the night.'

Noreen sat with bowed head and as he passed the puncher caught a whispered, 'I'm sorry,' which braced him up like a tonic. Silently he followed his late employer to the back of the ranch-house, where there was an empty hut which had once been a store-room. It was strongly built of adobe, with heavy wooden doors fastened by a padlock and staple.

'There's a box to sit on, an' I'll fetch yu some blankets an' grub,' said his gaoler, and left him to his reflections.

Half an hour passed and then Simon returned with a lantern, blankets, and a tray of food. He untied the captive's hands that he might eat but stood in the doorway the while with his pistol drawn. As soon as the meal was done, he replaced the rope on his wrists and locked the door.

CHAPTER XVII

For a long time the prisoner sat motionless, pondering on his position; it appeared hopeless

enough. The unexpected discovery of his identity was a crushing blow for it meant short shrift at the hands of his enemies, and the probable loss of all his friends. More than one county was offering a big reward for the capture of Sudden the outlaw, and once it became known that he was taken, there was likely to be a 'neck-tie party' in Hatchett's Folly.

The puncher, however, was not the type to give in; even while he thought, he had been busy trying to loosen the bonds on his wrists. He met with no success, for your cattleman understands knots almost as well as a sailor, and Simon had done his work well. By the dim light of the lantern Green examined his prison, and saw little hope of leaving it even with his hands free, nevertheless, he persevered with his bonds; it was, at least, something to do. Looking through the foot-square aperture which served as a window, he could see that it was very dark outside, and he judged the time to be near midnight. Suddenly he was conscious of movement, the sound of a stealthy footfall outside the hut, then the grate of a key in the padlock, and the door opened to admit Noreen. She had a knife in one hand.

'Quick, your bonds,' she whispered, and when she had slashed the rope apart, she added, 'Larry is waiting at the big cedar with a horse. Go at once.'

'But yu will get in wrong with yore Dad over this,' protested the prisoner.

'Well, he will be furious, of course, but I can manage him,' she replied.

'Yu are savin' my life,' he said slowly. 'I don't know how to thank yu.'

'Make better use of it,' she flashed back, and was gone.

The released man saw her melt into the shadow, and then, with the caution of an Indian trailer, made his way to the spot the girl had mentioned, the big cedar at the point where the trail from Hatchett's entered the ranch. Here, deep in the gloom of the foliage, he found Larry and two horses. The boy executed a silent war-dance when he saw his friend.

'No time for gassin' now,' he whispered. 'Fork yore cayuse an' we'll punch the breeze.'

He himself set the example, and when Green did the like he found he was astride his own pony, Bullet.

'He was outside the corral this mornin'—musta headed for here when yu was downed,' explained Larry. 'Here's yore guns; Rattler had 'em, an' thinks he has still.'

Green buckled the belt around him and tried to express his thanks, but the other cut them short. 'Shucks,' he said. 'I ain't done nothin'; yu gotna thank the Pretty Lady—she thought of it all. Which way we goin'?'

'We?' echoed the fugitive.

'Shore,' came the confident reply. 'I'm goin' with yu. I talked it over with the Pretty Lady, an' we agreed that yu ain't to be trusted alone. No, it ain't a bit o' good yore cussin' me out thataway.'

'But, yu blazin' jackass, can't yu see what yo're doin'?' expostulated Green. 'I'm a rustler, an' if yo're caught with me, yo're one an'

'It'll be neckties for two, eh? Well, we won't be caught then. Now that's settled, s'pose we decide where to head for.'

'The nearest lunatic asylum for yu, but as I reckon that's a piece away, why, we'll make for the Frying Pan.'

'That bughouse idea is a right good one for yu too. Why, yu bone-head, don't yu guess that yore pestiferous past will be known there? Ain't yu aware that Old Impatience is a friend o' Simon, an' that yu will be steppin' out o' one trap into another?'

Green's reply was no set his mouth in motion. 'We gotta take chances,' he said.

Larry ranged alongside. 'Chances?' he snorted disgustedly. 'Yu remind me of a chap called Lukins I met up with in Dodge one time, he was dead set on 'em. Somebody roped a

mountain lion an' fetched it into town in a cage, an' this fool Lukins puts up a bet he'll scratch the back of its head with his empty hand. "Cats like that," he says, "an' as this animile ain't nothin' but a big cat he'll like it too." Well, the brute didn't seem none in love with it, for Lukins lost an arm, an' the doc what attended to him reckoned he was clever to save the rest of him.'

Green laughed. 'Leeming ain't no wild animal,' he said. 'The fact is, he's got a leveller head than some o' yu think, but before we go any further there's one thing yu gotta right to know.' 'S'pose yu mean what I'm to call yu? I shore got a choice, ain't I? Don, Green, or—Sudden.' If Larry had wished to surprise his friend he had his desire. 'Who told yu—Miss Norry?' he queried.

'Nope,' was the reply. 'Snap—he's knowed it some time; recognised yore gun-action when yu trimmed Snub's whiskers for him. He allowed I oughtta know, but he threatened to blow my liver out if I breathed a word of it.'

'When was this?'

'Couple o' hours ago, when he heard I was comin' with yu. He'd 'a' been along too but he reckoned he'd be more use at the Y Z. Told me to tell yu that he's with yu to his last chip.'

'Good old Snap,' breathed Green softly, and in truth he was deeply moved. His life had been hard for the most part, and for years now he had been a wanderer drifting from place to place, with never a friendly face to greet him, and with no future to look to but one of satisfied vengeance. And here he had found comrades who were trusting him when ninety-nine out of a hundred would have turned their backs or their guns on him. He smiled in the darkness, and then said, soberly, 'Yes, I'm the man they call Sudden, an' there's somethin' like ten thousand waitin' for the man who takes me in. Don't that tempt yu, Larry?'

The boy spurred his horse and shouted savagely, 'C'mon. What d'yu think I am, anyway?'

'Yo're a natural-born fool,' replied Green, 'an' I must be another, 'cause I like yu for it.'

'Huh! I'm still a-chasin' that foreman's job,' retorted the boy. 'Lookin' after little old me is what I'm doin', that's all.' His friend laughed softly and no more was said until they drew near the Frying Pan ranch, when the older man slowed down and cautioned: 'Swing round a bit so that we don't pass the bunkhouse; I want to get Leeming by himself.'

As they noiselessly approached the ranch-house they saw that there was a light in the living-room. Dismounting and trailing the reins, they crept up to the window and saw that Leeming was alone in the room. A light tap on the glass brought him to his feet instantly, and gripping his gun, he asked, 'Who's there?'

'Larry Barton, from the Y Z. I want to speak to yu on the quiet,' came the reply.

Leeming disappeared and in a moment the front door opened and the visitors slid in. Their host, still carrying his gun, was just to the left of the opening, where he could get his shot in first in case of trickery. At the sight of Barton, however, he slipped the weapon back into the holster and grinned.

"Lo, Larry, gotta be careful these days," he said, and then as Green followed his companion, his face darkened and his hand went to his six-shooter again. 'I wasn't lookin' for yu, Green; yu ain't cherishin' the notion that I got any sympathy with rustlers, are yu?'

'No, seh, not any,' drawled the other. 'So yu have heard all about me? Ain't it a licker how news gets around in some parts?'

'One o' the Y Z boys met one o' mine on the range an' told him yu'd been caught rustlin' their cattle,' replied Leeming grimly. 'That's all I know, an' if it's true it's a-plenty.'

'Mebbe it is, but there's more to tell,' said the other. 'I came here to-night to put my cards on the table if yu are willin' to listen; if yu ain't, I can go.'

'Huh, there might be two words to that,' growled the catnleman, with a glance towards the bunkhouse from which one shot would bring his men on the run.

The visitor read the thought and shook his head. 'Don't yu think of it, seh,' he said gently. 'I ain't got no quarrel with yu or yore outfit, but—shucks—war-talk won't get us nowheres.

What's the word from yu?'

Leeming dropped into the nearest chair; he realised that his guest had him hog-tied. If he called his men he would be dead before they reached him, and while they might succeed in capturing the Y Z couple, it would only be at the cost of more lives.

'Go ahead,' he said shortly.

The cowpuncher complied. Step by step he told of his discoveries and suspicions, omitting, however, his own identity and that of Tarman and the Spider. Leeming watched him closely but did not interrupt. When the story was ended he sat for some moments turning it over.

'I allus doubted Blaynes,' he said, 'but I can't see why yore own gang downed yu, 'less they suspected yu were just spyin'.' 'It'll perhaps be a bit clearer when I tell yu that Tarman is the Spider,' Green explained.

Leeming leapt from his seat. 'What?' he exploded. 'Yu shore o' that?'

'Had it from one of his own men,' was the reply. 'But I got no proof, an' Simon laughed at me when I told him; said the feller is goin' to buy into the Y Z an' marry Miss Norry, an' asked me was it likely he'd rustle his own cows. Well, it don't seem so, but as I pointed out, there's others in the gang as want pickin's, an' Tarman ain't put down any cash yet.'

Job stamped up and down the room. 'Bah!' he said. 'Simon's an old fool. What, give his girl an' his ranch to a feller like that, a stranger? I've a notion to go an' call Mr. Tarman's bluff right now.'

Green shook his head. 'That wouldn't help any; he's got most o' the fools in Hatchett's eatin'—or rather, drinkin' oun of his hand. We gotta let him run on the rope a bit longer. What I want to know is, will yu an' yore boys come a-runnin' if I send the word?'

'What yu aimin' to do?' asked Job.

'Me an' Larry'll take to the woods an' snoop around. If we can catch Tarman at the Crossed Dumb-bell I reckon that'll be proof a-plenty, but before I ask yu to tie to me there's somethin' yu oughtta know.' Green paused for a space and the muscles around his lips grew tense.

'There's a feller known as "Sudden" who's bein' pretty eagerly looked for. Yu will oe told that I'm him, an'—it's true.'

The calm announcement jarred the ranch-owner into a state of petrification; with mouth and eyes wide open he stared at the man who had made it, wondering if his ears had deceived him. Then, as the full significance of the statement seeped into his bewildered brain, he snatched at his gun, only to find that Green's was already levelled at his heart, though he had seen no movement. The outlaw's left hand was in the air, palm outwards, the peace sign.

'Easy, Leeming, I ain't lookin' for trouble, but I'm ready for it,' Green said quietly. 'As I just told yu, I am Sudden, but yu can take it from me I ain't guilty o' all the crimes that's been pinned to him. Why, 'bout three weeks ago he was reported to have robbed the bank at Lilyville, four hundred miles from here, an' I was on the Y Z ranch. But that don't matter; what I want yu to get into yore head is that I'm playin' straight with yu in this rustlin' game.'

'What brought yu into these parts?' asked Leeming.

'I didn't come to steal cows,' replied the outlaw. 'I ain't a cattle-thief nor a hold-up, an' I never pull a gun until I have to. My business here was to look for two men—I've been all over the country in the last few years, hopin' to strike their trails. That's my job, findin' them two fellers, but I gotta live too, so I took on at the Y Z. Now that's the straight goods. I'd like to

have yore help, but whether or no, I'm agoin' to clean up around here.'

'An' he won't have to go it alone, Leeming,' interposed Larry. 'Me, Snap, Dirty, Simple, an' Ginger are back of him.'

The ranchman considered the pair in silence. He had been watching Green closely and believed that he was speaking the truth. On the other hand, the man was a self-confessed outlaw, and a notorious one at that. The support of the Y Z boys, whom he knew to be good fellows, carried a lot of weight; they were not the kind to take sides against their own ranch without good reason, and he never had liked Blaynes. As for Tarman—impulsively he stood up and held out his hand.

'I'll go yu, boys,' he said. 'Now, what do yu want me to do?'

'Outfit us with grub an' ammunition an' be ready to come a-bilin' when yu get the call,' Green replied. 'Meantime, o' course, yu ain't seen hide nor hair of us.'

'That's easy,' said their host, and led the way to his storeroom. Here they made up a parcel of bacon, beans, coffee, salt, and flour, borrowing also a coffee-pot, skillet, and two tin cups. A plentiful supply of cartridges completed their preparations, and Leeming slid to the door to make sure that the coast was clear.

'One more point,' Green said. 'We may be so fixed that we can't send a message. Well, we'll be over Big Chief way; look out for a smoke signal, balled three, two, three. If yu don't hear nothin' of us for a week or two it'll mean we're both rubbed out, an' yu might pay the Crossed Dumb-bell a visit; I've told yu how to find it. An' keep an eye on Tarman—he's the king-pin. So long.'

Leaving the ranch by the back door they faded into the darkness, found their horses, and departed without any of the men in the bunkhouse knowing of their visit. Leeming returned to his chair and loaded a pipe thoughtfully.

'Sudden, eh?' he muttered. 'Damned if he don't look it too. Wouldn't care to be either o' those fellers he's after. Durn it, I believe he's straight, an' I reckon I done right; them Y Z friends o' his are the best o' the bunch. Guess I'd better mosey over an' see Simon to-morrow.'

Leeming reached the Y Z during the morning and found it, as he expected, in a fine state of commotion. Simon's attitude puzzled him; the old man was in a savage temper, but behind it all his friend sensed a kind of fear. Norry, of course, was in deep disgrace and Job shook an admonishing finger at her. Her father, he learned, had gone to visit the prisoner that morning only to find the cage open and the bird missing. He had at once assumed that some of Green's sympathisers in the outfit were guilty, and returned to the house vowing threats of vengeance, to be confronted by his daughter who calmly confessed to being the culprit. For a moment the old man fairly goggled at her.

'Yu—let—him—out?' he gasped. 'Yu! What in hell for?'

The girl faced him bravely. 'I paid a debt; twice he came to my help,' she said, and went on to tell of the second occasion. Simon listened and scowled. He knew that she had done right, that she had acted as he would like a daughter of his to act, but in the special circumstances it was the last thing he had wanted to happen, and man-like, he elected to see only his own side of the matter.

'Yu must be mad,' he said savagely. The feller's a thief an' a cold-blooded killer, an' yu gotta turn him loose. Whatever he did for yu was done for his own purposes—to throw dust in yore eyes an' mine, an', by heaven, he did it. Now, yu get to yore room an' keep out o' this. I'm

agoin' to hunt Mister Sudden down an' hang him.'

'Simon, yu been associatin' too much with me—yu've lost yore temper,' said a satirical voice, and they looked up to find the owner of the Frying Pan regarding them quizzically. 'What yu been doin', Norry, to get him all riled up like this?' It was the old man who answered, explaining the situation in a few explosive sentences. Leeming adopted a philosophic attitude which, had his friend been less perturbed, would have aroused his suspicion; it was utterly unlike the Frying Pan man to take things quietly.

'Well, Simon, what's the use o' makin' a fuss?' he said. 'The beans is spilled. O' course, Norry hadn't oughtta loosed him, but she figured it was the proper caper, an', damn me, I like her for it. Mebbe the feller ain't as bad as his reputation after all.'

Petter turned on the other in amazement. 'Well, I'll be hanged,' he said. 'I never thought to hear Job Leeming makin' excuses for a rustler.'

'I don't know yet that Green is one,' replied Job quietly. 'Then yu must be devilish hard to convince, Mr. Leeming,' chimed in another voice.

It was Tarman; he had ridden up, trailed his reins, and approached the group on the verandah unnoticed. Turning to Simon, after sweeping off his hat to Noreen, he added, 'I hope yu have him safe, Petter.'

'I had him fast enough, but Norry slipped down in the night an' turned him loose,' replied the rancher disgustedly. 'She reckoned she owed him somethin'.'

'What? Yu turned him loose?' cried Tarman, whirling on the culprit, and before the sudden fury in his face she recoiled. 'Are yu mad? Why, yu oughtta be...'

He pulled up sharply, realising that he was losing all control and on the verge of making a fool of himself. Noreen, after the first instinctive shrinking from those eyes blazing with anger, faced him coolly enough.

'Hanged in his place, were you about to say, Mr. Tarman?' she inquired.

The big man had got himself in hand again with wonderful rapidity. 'If I was, yu almost deserve it,' he retorted, with a grim laugh. 'Yo're takin' a hand in a game yu don't understand, an' others will have to pay. Now, see here. Yu figure to be in his debt for pullin' yu off that wild hoss an' yu let him free to square yoreself. That's fair enough from yore point of view, an' does yu credit, but yu didn't stop to think that every crime that feller commits from now on will be yore fault, did yu? There's times when private interests have got to be sacrificed to the community at large. Ain't that so?'

The reasoning was specious enough, and the speaker was his own suave self again, but the girl had had another glimpse of the real man, and somehow the picture of Tarman sacrificing anything for the benefit of his fellow-man would not take a convincing shape. Leeming saw that she was troubled and saved her the necessity of trying to justify herself.

'Women act on impulse, Tarman, an' it's a darn good thing for us that they do,' he said. 'Yu just run along, Norry, an' don't worry yore pretty head about it no more.'

'That may be, but there's one thing she's got to know,' interposed Tarman, 'an' that is that Green's real object in comin' to these parts was to find an' kill a man, an' there he stands.' He pointed to Simon as he made this dramatic announcement, and the girl's eyes opened incredulously.

'Daddy,' she cried. 'It can't be true.' And then, remembering what the cowpuncher had himself told her, she sank into a chair and covered her face with her hands. Tarman regarded her with grim satisfaction.

'Yu know it is, an' I know it,' he continued. 'It's too long a yarn to spin now, but the old chap who befriended Green reckoned that Simon had done him dirt, which he hadn't, an' on his deathbed he set the young hound on his trail.'

Noreen looked up. 'Then why hasn't he carried out his purpose? He's had plenty of opportunities.'

'He doesn't know yet that yore father is the feller he's in search of, when he does, all hell an' high water won't save him.' White to the lips and sick at heart, the girl muttered, 'I'm sorry, Daddy,' and going to her room, flung herself on the bed. She could not grasp it—the whole story seemed too horrible, and it appeared impossible to her that any man, outlaw though he might be, could act in such a despicable manner as Green must have done, were the accusation true. Yet she could not forget the expression on his face when he had told her of his mission of vengeance.

When she had left the verandah, Tarman looked at his companions with malicious triumph.

'Reckon she won't hanker to help him again,' he said.

Was that the straight goods or were yu makin' it up to throw a scare into her?' asked Leeming.

'The tale's true enough, Job,' Petter said. 'The feller's after my scalp, though I didn't know it till Joe told me; he thought he recognised him an' ferreted around a piece. Point is, what are we goin' to do? Hunt him down?'

Tarman shook his head. 'No chance in this country. We'll bait a trap for him; yu leave it to me.'

At this moment Blaynes came up. 'Barton is missin' an' as he's took his own hoss an' his war-bags, it don't look like he's acomin' back,' he said. 'Reckon it was him turned that damn rustler loose; they was allus pretty thick.'

'Mebbe yo're right,' said his employer, who was not anxious to advertise his daughter's interest in the late prisoner.

'What yu goin' to do about it, boss? The boys are sayin' we oughta get on his trail while it's hot,' the foreman continued. 'What am I to tell 'em?'

The remark was an unfortunate one, since it provided the owner of the Y Z with an excuse for venting his pent-up anger. He whirled savagely on the speaker.

'Tell 'em to go to hell,' he stormed. 'When I want any advice on runnin' my own affairs I'll shore ask for it. Get agoin' an' sic them lazy devils onto their jobs.'

Leeming, watching the foreman closely, saw him stiffen as though about to reply in kind and then, with an evil scowl, he turned and slouched away. The eyes of Tarman and the foreman had met for an instant, and Leeming fancied that the former had slightly shaken his head, but he could not be sure; the act might have been involuntary, or in general disapproval of an unedifying exhibition.

Leaving the other two, Job strolled down to the bunkhouse, of which he found Snap the sole occupant. The gunman greeted him with his rare twisted grin.

'Rattler seems to have had a mighty poor reception from the Old Man,' he volunneered. 'He come back a-bilin'.'

'Well, Simon shore did get the notion that yu fellers wanta run the ranch,' Leeming replied.

'He's pretty sore over losing his prisoner.'

'Too bad,' Lunt said gravely, not a muscle on his face moving. 'Wonder who could 'a' done it?'

The cattleman laughed. 'S'll right, Snap, I ain't tryin' to find out,' he said. 'Know anythin''

about Sudden, the outlaw?' Snap shot a quick look at his questioner. 'No more than anybody else—he's a bit of a mystery,' he replied. 'I saw him years ago an' he's shore a ring-tailed merriple with a gun, but I've allus reckoned he's been handed the credit for a lot o' things he had nothin' to do with. Feller's only got to rub out one or two toughs an' he gets half the crimes in the country ladled onto him.'

Leeming knew something of the little gunman's own past and did not pursue what was evidently a subject which aroused bitter recollections.

'Where do yu reckon Green will make for?' was his next query.

'I ain't doin' any reckonin',' came the blunt reply, and Job saw that Lunt was not to be drawn. When he got back to the ranch-house he found Tarman on the point of returning to town, and he suddenly decided to accompany him. Before leaving, he slipped into the kitchen, where he found Noreen alone. Her pale face and the misery in her eyes made him mutter an oath. 'Oh, what does it all mean, Uncle Job? I can't believe it,' she cried.

'There, don't yu fuss yoreself, my girl, it'll all come straight,' he replied soothingly. 'I don't believe it myself, but, for the love o' Mike, don't tell yore father that.'

To Simon himself he simply said, 'Send for me if you want me, an' don't trust anybody too much.'

'I ain't trustin' out-o'-work punchers no more, if that's what yu mean,' replied Simon, bitterly. It was not, but Leeming could hardly explain in the presence of the other guest so he let it go. As they loped along the trail to Hatchett's he put a plain question: 'What's yore scheme for gettin' hold o' this feller Green?'

'I ain't got it straightened out yet—just millin' round in my head,' Tarman replied evasively. 'I reckon it will work though, an' once I get my rope on him no fool girl will be able to set him foot-loose again, an' yu can stick a pin in that.'

'Huh! I guess he'll quit.'

'Yu got another guess—he won't; I know the breed. He come here to wipe out Simon an' he'll do it.'

'But yu said he don't know it's Simon he wants,' Job reminded him.

'He don't yet, but he will,' arid Tarman grinned as though an amusing idea had just occurred to him.

The Frying Pan owner pondered on this in silence. If Tarman could contrive that Green should kill Simon and hang for it, he removed an enemy and possible rival, and would only have to wed Noreen to become at once sole owner of the Y Z. Was this the game? He determined to make an attempt to find out.

'How do yu like this country, Tarman?' he asked.

'Fine,' replied the other. 'It's even better than the reports that fetched me here. Yu may as well know now as later, I'm aimin' to buy in on the Y Z an' settle down here, an' I might take on yore range too if we can come to terms.'

'I've no idea of sellin',' Leeming told him.

'Mebbe yu will change yore mind,' smiled Tarman. 'If yu don't, well, I'll be tickled to death to have yu as a neighbour. Yu can see now why I'm hornin' in on this rustlin' game; I don't propose to have any damned outlaw projectin' round stealin' my cattle.'

'I've allus reckoned Norry would have the Y Z,' Job said, reflectively.

'So she will,' smirked the big man. 'But she'll get me with it.' 'Got that fixed, have yu?'

Leeming said, a trifle sarcastically. 'Not altogether, but I'm bettin' there won't be no great difficulty,' was the satisfied rejoinder. 'The old man's strong for it an' I fancy the girl don't

exactly dislike me.'

'Huh! Yore attitude just now warn't calculated no impress her favourably.'

'Shucks! Women like a man as is a man—they fall for the rough stuff every time; I know how to handle 'em.'

Leeming was silent for a while. He did not like the fellow, and he liked still less the idea of his marrying Noreen. If Green was right, Tarman was a scoundrel of the worst description, and in any case, he showed himself to be a conceited braggart. Job determined that the girl should not be forced into such a union if he could do anything to prevent it.

'What's Green got against Petter?' he asked.

'Oh, it's an old story—nothin' to it. Yu better ask Simon himself,' was the reply.

By the time they arrived at Hatchett's Folly Leeming had learned nothing more; apparently the big man had told as much as he wished of his plans. It was early yet for the town to be waking up for the evening diversions but there was an unwonned air of excitement; little groups of men stood in the street discussing something, and when they entered the saloon they found more than the usual quota of customers for the time of day.. It was Silas who blurted out the news.

'Say, yu heard about than feller Green?' he queried as they reached the bar, and without waiting for an answer, went on, 'He's Sudden, the outlaw. What do you know about that, huh?'

Tarman stifled an oath and laughed instead. 'Shucks, someone's been stringin' yu, Silas,' he said.

'String nothin',' retorted the barkeeper. 'He's been recognised, an' they say that Simon has him under lock an' key at the Y Z. Tonk is gettin' a posse to go an' fetch him in.'

'Then Tonk can save himself the trouble,' said Tarman. 'We just come from the Y Z, an' Green ain't there.'

'Not there, yu say?' asked the marshal, who had entered in time to hear the last few words.

'But he was there, warn't he?' Tarman explained why it was no longer of any use for the officer to journey to the Y Z, and Tonk's face grew redder and redder as he listened.

'She turned him loose?' he yelled. 'My Gawd, I've a mind to fetch the damned hussy an' put her where he oughtta be—in the pen. She's bruk the law.'

Job Leeming's face grew stormy. 'Don't overplay yore hand, marshal,' he grated. 'Green warn't the law's prisoner, so there's no legal offence in setting him free. Another thing yu gotta remember—when you have to refer to that young lady yu do it respectful, or I'll just naturally bust yu wide open.'

'An' that goes for me too,' added Tarman, with an ugly look at the marshal.

A chorus of voices endorsed the sentiment and Tonk realised that he was not adding to his popularity.

'Well, o' course, I didn't mean just that,' he said, with a halfhearted grin which deceived no one. 'I own to gettin' a bit het up over the chance this town has missed. Than feller's worth all of ten thousand plunks, an' to think I've had him under my hand in this very place. Gosh, if only I'd 'a' knowed.'

'Blame good thing for yu yu didn't,' sneered Tarman. 'Why, yu poor simp, if yu'd tried to arrest him, yu'd have been halfway to hell before yu got yore gun out.'

'An' that's whatever,' corroborated the barkeeper. 'Look what he done to Snub. I allus had a notion he warn't just an ordinary cow-wrastler.'

'Allasame, we gotta do somethin',' said the marshal. 'What about a posse to search him out, Leeming?'

But the owner of the Frying Pan was no longer there. Knowing that to save his face the officer would have to make a show of activity, and having no desire to take part in it, he had discreetly slipped out of the saloon.

CHAPTER XVIII

GREEN stretched out his legs luxuriously as he reclined by the little fire on the glowing embers of which was a pan giving forth the appetising odour of sizzling bacon. They had ridden hard all night, and now in the early morning had camped in a deep, wooded gully well to the north of the rustlers' hidden valley.

Keen as the air was it had a tang in it that acted like a tonic, and the cowpuncher filled his lungs and was glad to be alive. Near-by, Larry, who had gone to fill the coffee-pot at a neighbouring stream, was singing lustily:

Oh, Bronco Bill was a bold, bad man, A bold, bad man was he.

An' he could ride, an' rope, an' shoot,

An' swaller the worst whiskey. Yeah, Bronco Bill could do that last

Better'n the other three.

As he came into sight warbling this gem, the man by the fire aised a warning hand. 'Hush,' he said. 'Ain't yu got any sense?' The singer paused in amazement. 'What harm's my singin' goin' to do?' he demanded.

'Kill all the frawgs—they'll die of envy,' replied Green solemnly, and then ducked as the boy threatened to pitch the coffee-pot at him. 'Put that on the fire, yu gale-in-the-night.' Larry complied, being fully as hungry as his friend.

'Mighta knowed yu couldn't appreciate good music,' he said. 'I can, that's why I'm objectin',' smiled the other. 'That sliced hawg's makin' all nhe melody I want to listen to just now.'

For the next fifteen minutes both were too busy to talk. Then, bacon and biscuit having been washed down with three cups of coffee apiece, they rolled smokes and prepared to take it easy for a while.

'Gosh, this suits me,' Larry said, as a delicate ring of smoke issued from his lips. 'Damn punchin' cows, I say.'

'Then yu ain't so keen on that foreman's job?' asked his friend, slyly.

The boy laughed. 'That's shore one to yu; first town we hit the drink is on me. We don't seem to be gettin' none nearer that foreman's job, do we?'

'Yo're shoutin',' Green agreed. 'Talkin' o' towns, where's the nearest railway point from here?'

'Big Rock is 'bout a hundred mile east, but the actual nearest is Jonesville, south, but yu gotta cross the desert.'

'Thank yu most to death, but that's the way I come.' 'What we want with a town?'

'We don't want one; I do,' Green corrected him. 'I gotta get a postage stamp.'

Larry looked at him; the older man's face was perfectly serious, but the boy suspected he was being joshed.

'We go together,' he said decidedly. 'I'm stickin' to yu like a wart on yore skin.'

'Wart? Yu? Yo're a blister. Well, I s'pose I gotna put up with yu. As the psalmist says, "These things is sent to try us," an' by Gosh, they do.'

Larry had no answer to this and having gained his point was willing to let it go. The camp having been cleared up, they got their horses and set out for Big Rock.

'Come to think of it, this ain't a bad move,' Larry remarked presently. 'It there's a posse on our trail they'll 'a' got tired o' lookin' for us time we get back, an' mebbe think we've flew the

coop.'

'I was wonderin' how long it would take yu to see that,' Green smiled. 'Well, well, never yu mind; yo're young yet an' wisdom comes with years, they say.'

'Huh, somethin' has done gone wrong with the system in yore case, Methusalem,' retorted Larry, furiously jabbing his spurred heel into the flank of his friend's horse, a proceeding which caused the outraged animal to stand straight up in the air. Green, totally unprepared for such a manoeuvre, was flung backwards and nearly unseated, only saving himself by a quick clutch at the horn of the saddle. Larry gave a whoop of delight. 'Yah!' he cried. 'Big Chief Cat o' the Mountains, tamer of wild ones, pulls leather. Gee, Don, I thought yu could ride.'

Green was too busy to reply at the moment, but when he had restored Bullet to a proper frame of mind, and recovered the hat which had fallen off at the first jar, he told the practical joker what he thought of him.

'Yu oughta be in a home,' he said witheringly. 'Not one for the half-witted—yu couldn't qualify even for that. Don't yu know yu might 'a' busted my neck, yu pie-faced idjut, makin' a play like that?'

'These things is sent to try us,' the boy quoted. 'Here's a level stretch; I'll race yu to the big tree for a dollar.'

'Yu go to blazes. My hoss is all flustered up through yore foolishness an' yu want to race. Yu gotta nerve.'

'I gotta hoss too,' with a disparaging glance at Bullet. 'Why don't yu use him?' came the instant retort.

Whereupon Larry surrendered gracefully, gave the Indian peace sign, and they proceeded amiably on their journey.

Big Rock, which they reached that night, had only one feature to distinguish it from any other frontier settlement, and that was the freak of Nature from which it derived its name.

Thrusting up from the plain which stretched flatly for many miles on all sides of it was a great chunk of rock, bare, grey, and practically unclimbable. How it came to be there was a mystery even scientists had failed to solve; as for the inhabitants of the sordid settlement which straggled about its base, they had other things to think of. The town came to life when the railroad, hoping for cattle shipments from the big ranches, ran a branch line to the famous landmark.

Like most of the places which depended upon the cow industry, existence there was spasmodic. After the round-ups, when the herds were driven in, the place seethed with excitement, and sleep was the last thing to be thought of. The cowboys, after a long spell of deprivation and hard work, had money to spend and appetites to satisfy, and Big Rock saw that they were not disappointed. Then would follow a period of inaction, broken only by the occasional advent of a range-rider, bent on a little personal spree.

The round-ups had not yet taken place and the town was passing through one of the comatose periods when Green and Larry arrived. Skirting the station and its empty cattle-pens, they came to a pretentious two-storey board edifice which announced itself as the 'Rock Saloon and Dance Hall,' and towered in shabby majesty above the squat log and adobe shacks which represented most of the other buildings. The visitors attached their mounts to the hitch-rail outside and walked in.

It was a largish room, and in the light of the oil lamps swung from the ceiling made some attempt at garish adornment. Tarnished gilt mirrors and flaming chromos punctuated the

walls, and a goodly array of bottles occupied the shelves at the back of the bar, which filled the side of the room facing the door. Tables, chairs, and cuspidors were dotted about, and on the left was another opening which led to the dance hall. Three men were lounging at the bar talking to the fellow in charge, a heavy-jowled, red-nosed man who regarded the newcomers with a suspicious scowl.

'What yu want?' he asked truculently.

'Civility first,' Green snapped back. 'Then a drink, a meal, and a bed a-piece.'

The barkeeper looked into the slitted, boring eyes of the stranger and his own stare wavered; when he spoke again his voice had lost its edge.

'There's a restyrong down the street—we don't do meals—an' our beds is all took,' he growled, pushing forward a bottle and glasses.

They poured their drinks, and then Green said, 'Gimme a sheet o' paper an' envelope.'

The bartender hesitated. 'Ain't—' he began, and stopped; there was something about this customer he did not like. Ordinarily he got away with his bullying but he had an uneasy impression that this time he had picked the wrong man. He fumbled in a drawer and produced the articles asked for. The cowpuncher took them and, retiring to a table, wrote his letter and sealed it. Larry remained at the bar, coolly returning the gaze of the other three customers. He decided that if they were a fair sample of the town's inhabitants, it was a good place to keep awake in. Seeing that the letter was finished, the barkeeper, his curiosity overcoming his dislike, asked, 'Want that mailed, Mister?'

'Nope,' replied the puncher, with a smile that told the dispenser of refreshment that his little ruse was seen through.

When they had departed the bartender looked at his friends. 'Suthin' funny 'bout that jigger,' he remarked. 'Fancy I've seen him afore somewheres.'

'He certainly has got a chilly eye,' said one. 'Me, I'd sooner monkey with a buzz-saw.'

'Allasame, they'll bear watchin',' said another, a little weedy chap, with an evil glint. 'I'm agoin' to trail 'em a few.'

He slipped out of the saloon and saw his quarry heading for the station-agent's, which was also the post office. He waited while they despatched their letter and then watched them enter the eating-house which the bartender had complimented with a quite unwarranted title. From there they went to the general store to supplement their supplies, for, as Green pointed out, they might have to keep clear of towns for quite a while. As they entered, another customer left, carrying a couple of vividly-labelled bottles. The proprietor of the store was enjoying a private joke.

'Dang me, if it don't beat the band,' he said. 'Say, what would yu guess was in them two bottles that feller was totin' out so careful?'

'Special brand o' nose-paint,' guessed Larry.

'No, sir, but yu ain't so far out after all, he, he,' tittered the storekeeper. 'It's head-paint—yes, black hair-dye—feller's goin' grey, I s'pose, an' I have to get that from Noo York for him, got a reg'lar order. No, I ain't never seen him, that's his man, comes in to fetch it. Ain't it a odd number, eh? Talk about women bein' the vain ones.'

They agreed that it certainly was singular in a country where personal appearance was not much studied. Green endeavoured, by artful questioning, to find out something more about the victim of vanity, but the storekeeper knew no more. When they had done their business and were in the street again, Larry said: 'Funny idea, feller dyeing his hair out here.'

'Shore is, but the funniest part is that I recognised the messenger; he's one o' Tarman's gang,'

Green said.

'Must be for him, but he don't look a subject for premature greyness.'

'Well, it don't signify much. Point is, unless the station-agent was lyin', an' I don't think he was, they ain't shippin' the cattle from here. What in the nation are they doin' with 'em?'

'They shore wouldn't run 'em across the desert,' Larry contributed. 'Why do yu reckon that booze-slinger turned hostile soon as we drifted in?'

'Dunn, but we'll go an' prospect him,' smiled his friend. 'I'm aimin' to occupy a bed to-night.'

They returned to the saloon and were about to enter when Green pulled his companion suddenly round the angle of the building. At the doorway a man on horseback was bending down in conversation with a second who stood on the sill, holding the door partly open. The listeners could not hear what was said, but presently the rider waved his hand and disappeared in the gloom.

'That was the hair-dye collector, warn't it?' whispered Larry. 'Yeah, an' he's give me an idea,' replied Green.

'Ain't Nature wonderful?' Larry said softly. 'Here's yu, born without an idea o' yore own, an' here's fellers created just to provide yu with 'em. Hi, yu lunkhead, that's my foot yu stepped on!'

'Sorry, but yu give me the idea,' Green chuckled. 'It'll be yore face next time. C'mon, yo're doin' that imitation limp real well.' 'Imitation, huh?' grunted Larry. 'I bet I gotta crushed toe, an' for a plugged peso I'd...'

But Green was at the saloon door, and Larry, who had no intention of letting him enter alone, followed at his heels. The place was filling up, and from the dance hall came the jingle of a badly treated piano. At the bar, talking to the tender, was the man they had seen at the door, a stubby, fat fellow, with slits for eyes and a ginger moustache festooned over a loose mouth. Green lounged to the bar, called for drinks, and then, looking the barkeeper straight in the eye, said, 'Found them beds yet?'

'I done told yu already as they's all spoke for,' came the surly reply.

'Why, so yu did—I shore forgot it,' smiled Green, and turning to his friend, he added, 'Now yu gotta admit I was right. Didn't I tell Joe Tarman we'd have to sleep on our saddles if we come to a one-hoss town like Big Rock, eh?'

Before Larry could reply, the man with the ginger moustache interposed : 'S'cuse me, stranger, do yu happen to be acquainted with Joe Tarman?'

'I happen to belong to his outfit, the Crossed Dumb-bell,' the puncher replied, telling the literal truth, for he had not yet been fired nor had he officially resigned. The effect of the information on the latter pushed the bottle forward, saying genially: 'They're on the house, gents. This is Mr. Scaife, who owns this joint.'

He waved a hand at the gingery individual, and the puncher completed the ceremony of introduction by giving their names.

'Pleased to welcome anyone from Joe here,' said Scaife oilily. 'Why, another of his men rode out this evening; perhaps yu saw him?'

'No, I didn't look—reckoned he'd be gone before we made it,' Green explained. 'Guess Stiffy got into a little game, as usual.'

'Yo're dead right—that's just what he did,' laughed Scaife. 'He'll have to ride all night to make up time, or Joe'll trim him to rights.'

The cowpuncher's ready answer and his fortunate knowledge of the rustler's little weakness had entirely dispelled all suspicion, and it did not take long to find out that the rustler chief

had quite a number of friends in Big Rock, and that if he was not loved, he was certainly feared. The squint-eyed, weedy man who had watched their movements earlier now came in, to be hailed and presented as 'Roddy' to 'Mr. Tarman's friends.' He became a genial creature. 'An' how's Joe makin' it in Hatchett's?' he inquired. 'Reckon he finds it middlin' quiet.' Green's own opinion was that Mr. Tarman had hitherto found it anything but quiet, but what he said was that Tarman appeared to like the place and was even thinking of buying a ranch and settling down. The statement evolved a perfect gust of merriment from his listeners, which was only quelled by a well-simulated look of cold indignation on the part of Green.

'Yu doubtin' my word?' he asked.

'Nary a doubt, friend,' gasped Scaife. 'Yu just gotta excuse me an' Rod an' Spike here, but it warn't fair to turn a hell of a joke like that on us without warnin', now was it?'

'Well, I expect I'm slow, but I don't see no joke,' Green replied, and the risible faculties of the three men once more disrupted their features. It was Spike who, with tears coursing down his none too clean cheeks, managed to explain:

'Yu said Joe was thinkin' of buyin' a ranch,' he spluttered.

'Ha, ha! so I did,' grinned Green. 'Well, the laugh is on me, an' the drinks likewise. Set 'em up, Spike, old settler.'

A little game of draw was proposed, and the visitor lost a few dollars very pleasantly to Scaife and Rod, but mellow as those two gentlemen undoubtedly became, Green could learn nothing as to the activities and interests of Tarman in Big Rock.

'Touchin' them beds,' Larry remarked, round about midnight.

'Which I'm free to admit I want to be touchin' one of 'em; we been ridin' all day,' returned his friend.

The saloon-keeper, being ahead of the game, had no objections to offer. 'Beds goes,' he said.

'Yu push yore brones into the corral an' fetch yore saddles along.'

Their bedroom was on the first floor at the back, a fact for which they had cause to be thankful later on. It was Larry who, awakened in the early hours of the morning by a pounding at the rear door of the hotel, got up to investigate. Cautiously opening their window he peered down. He heard the landlord descend the stairs and unbolt the door, and then, 'Hell, Stiffy, what's brung yu back again?'

'Blasted bronc stepped in a hole an' bruk a leg—had to shoot him an' hoof it here carryin' this cussed saddle,' was the disgusted answer. 'Got a drink? I'm about all in.'

'Shore. Tough luck about the hoss,' replied the host. 'Yu better hole up till daylight, an' then yu can have company; I got two o' yore chaps here.'

They disappeared into the building and Larry heard no more. But he had already got an 'earful,' as he phrased it, and without delay he aroused his companion.

'Yu gotta stop sawin' wood an' get a wiggle on,' he whispered, and told what he had so luckily overheard. 'Now, friend

Stiffy is probably puttin' friend Scaife wise at this very moment of time. Do yu guess he knows that yu are Sudden?'

'He's liable to find out if he comes foolin' around,' smiled Green.

'Don't be sixteen sorts of a damn fool,' retorted Larry. 'Yu ain't aimin' to stay an' fight it out, are yu? Chances is, he does know it, an' do yu reckon this town'll let ten thousand bucks get away from it? What we gotta consider is when will they make a move?'

'Not till the mornin' an' we'll move first,' Green said. 'Stiffy is feelin' right like his name just now, an' bed will listen good to him., They're a-comin' up now, snore for all yo're worth—no, for lots more than that.'

They heard stealthy footsteps pause outside their door and then a low chuckle came from the

landlord.

'Yu'd think they'd wake each other up, wouldn't yu?' he said. 'Needn't worry 'bout them—they'll be here when we want 'em in the mornin'.'

After a wait of half an hour, by which time the house was quiet again, Green pushed up the window, slid through, and hanging from the sill by his hands, dropped noiselessly to the ground. Larry then lowered their saddles and followed. Stepping warily, to avoid the litter of tin cans and other refuse which might betray them, they made their way to the corral. The horses gave them little trouble, for they were well trained, and accustomed to come at a call. Once clear of the town they headed for Hatchett's at a steady lope, congratulating themselves upon having evaded an awkward predicament.

'O' course they'll follow us, but we gotta good start an' if we switch off the trail presently an' take to the brush, I reckon we can fool 'em,' Green remarked.

They did this, choosing a spot where a rocky defile offered a surface upon which hoofs would make little or no impression, and supplemented this by riding for half a mile along the bed of the first stream they came to.

'Guess that oughtta make it safe,' Larry said, as they plunged again into the undergrowth and emerged upon an open, rolling stretch of deep grass.

Their start, however, was not so good as they deemed it to be, for they had under-estimated the cupidity and ambition of Mr. Scaife. The knowledge that he had under his humble roof a famous outlaw—for Stiffy had blurted out the news, having learned it himself in Hatchett's, where it was now common property—had spoilt the landlord's rest, and less than an hour after his guests had departed, he had snolen down to make sure they were still there. Unable to hear any reassuring sounds, he had opened the lockless door to find the nest empty. Where upon, at the thought of the rewards which had gone a-glimmering, he lifted up his voice and—swore.

'They can't 'a' got far; rustle up two-three other fellers an' we'll git 'em yet,' suggested Stuffy, when he heard the dire tidings. Thus it came about that when the fugitives, leisurely crossing a little plateau, looked back, they saw five moving dots descending a ridge some seven or eight miles away. Spurring their mounts, they hastened to get out of sight, but they did not doubt but that they had been seen, for the pursuers would naturally be on the watch.

'We're a couple of bone-heads—mighta knowed that landlord feller wouldn't rest easy,' Green growled. 'There's only five of 'em, anyways.'

'Mebbe there's more back o' them.'

'Reckon not—they wouldn't wanta split the reward too much. We'll have to stand 'em off; can't have 'em trailin' us all the time.'

They pushed on at a fast clip until they came to the spot they were looking for, a long, narrow gorge with precipitous sides which only a cat could hope to scale, and with little in the way of vegetation to serve as cover. Boulders and rock debris littered the sandy bed of the gorge, which had at one time been a watercourse.

'Hope she ain't a blind one,' Larry remarked, with a glance at the beetling cliffs on either side.

'If she is, we'll be wantin' wings.'

'An' we may get 'em too, if them hombres can shoot,' returned his friend grimly.

'Mother's cheery little helper, ain't yu? Allus lookin' on the bright side,' grinned Larry.

They rode far enough along the gorge to make the task of going round to cut them off a long one, and then, turning a sudden bend, simultaneously pulled down their mounts.

'There she is—the very place,' cried Larry, pointing to a clump of boulders among which a

few snunted bushes were growing, about a hundred yards away. A brief examination satisfied them, and tying the horses behind an outflung shoulder of the cliff, they squatted down to await the pursuers.

'If they come a-battin' round than bend we can get a couple of 'em 'fore they know we're here,' Larry said complacently. 'It'll be like money from home.'

'Yo're a gory-minded sport, ain't yu?' Green retorted. 'No, seh; they get their warnin'; I ain't no sneakin' bush-whacker.'

'Yu are thirty-two sorts of a darn fool,' Larry said heatedly. 'There's five of 'em, ain't there? Fine lot o' warnin' they'd 'a' give us if we'd waited in Big Rock.'

We'll drop a couple o' hosses, though I hate doin' it, an' if they want to argue after that, we'll shore accommodate 'em.'

'An' he's got the reputation of bein' a cold-blooded killer,' was Larry's unspoken thought. They sat there waiting, each ensconced behind a serviceable chunk of rock, with rifle ready. It was cool in the gorge now, but the sun was climbing the sky and once it became vertical, they knew they would have a grilling time. They had filled their canteens at the last stream, and had been careful to place them out of reach of questing outlets; if the fight were prolonged, thirst would become an important factor.

'They're a long time gettin' here—must be comin' dead slow,' Larry said impatiently. Hardly had the words left his lips when there came the rapid beat of hoofs, somewhat dulled by the sand, and in a few moments the bunched riders dashed round the bend, Scaife and the Crossed Dumb-bell representative slightly ahead. The venomous crack-crack of two rifles reverberated and re-echoed along the gorge, the sound tossed from wall to wall, and the horses of the leaders dropped, sending their riders headlong. The rest of the party, whirling their startled mounts, scampered back round the protecting curve. The landlord and his fallen companion clawed their way crab-wise behind the dead bodies of their horses and began to industriously pump lead at the clump of rocks sheltering the ambushers. The other three, having recovered from their panic, also commenced to waste cartridges, but without eliciting any response.

'One of 'em'll get careless an' give us somethin' to aim at presently,' Green argued. 'Betcher Stiffy will try an' make that rock on his left; dead hosses is poor cover.'

Evidently the rustler was of the same opinion, for he suddenly rose into view and sprang for the boulder in question. It was less than ten yards away and he had almost reached it when Green fired; they saw him stumble and pitch forward.

'Missed him,' gibed Larry. 'Wish I'd pulled too.'

'Missed nothin',' said the marksman. 'I got him where I aimed to—in the left laig.'

'Huh, if yo're thinkin' o' startin' a hospital round here I'd like to suggest that a cemetery is less trouble an' safer.'

'Yu been readin' too many dime novels. Wonder if friend Scaife will go to help friend Stiffy? What d'yu think?' 'Betcher ten level he don't,' said Larry promptly.

'Yo're a reckless feller with yore money,' reproved Green. 'But I gotta take yu. Look, there he goes!' He fired as he spoke, and the landlord, with a hearty curse, crumpled up, and then rolled behind the rock which sheltered the groaning Stiffy.

'Tough luck havin' to down a feller when he's earnin' yu money, but I had to do. I got him in the right laig, so they've still got a sound pair between 'em.'

'Well, of all the ' began the disgusted loser.

'Don't say it,' admonished Green. 'When yu get yore growth yu will know that even things

like Scaife can act pretty near human at times. What do yu reckon they'll do now?"

The answer came from the attacking force in the shape of a perfect hurricane of lead which tore up the ground and searched every nook and crevice of their hiding-place.

"What in 'ell are they tryin' to do—knock this blame rock out of the way?" asked Larry peevishly, as a fragment of stone grazed his cheek and the bullet which had detached it went whining into the distance. "If these jiggers ain't careful somebody's goin' to get hurt."

In the face of this fusillade the two men kept close, hugging the ground behind their barrier. The hail of shots was followed by a single bullet which dropped just between the outstretched legs of the younger man, causing him to promptly double them up and snuggle closer to the sheltering stone.

"They musta got a balloon," he gasped.

Another shot followed, cutting a neat half-circle out of the brim of Larry's hat, which was entirely too close to be pleasant. "Dann smart," murmured Green.

"Huh! think so, do yu?" snorted Larry. "A little bit smarter an' yu'd be alone. This blame rock musta shrunk."

"They got the edge on us," Green explained. "While they bombarded us just now one of 'em nipped across an' climbed that big tree by the bend. He's the feller who's doin' the potshootin'. Take a peep an' draw his fire; then I'll get him."

"Yu go to blazes; I ain't no Aunt Sally," retorted Larry. "That jigger shoots too well an' I ain't gamblin' with him—none whatever."

For some time silence reigned in the gorge, each side waiting for the other to make a move. Then a jet of smoke spirted from higher up the tree and the missile snatched Green's hat from his head. Instantly he fired into the midst of the thinning smoke, there was a disturbance of the foliage as a heavy body crashed downwards, until, caught by a big lower branch, it hung, limply swinging.

"Crashed," said Larry laconically.

The dispiriting effect of this loss on the enemy was soon apparent. From behind the boulder which sheltered Scaife arose a rifle with a dirty white rag fluttering from the barrel, and a voice shouted:

"Yu fellers can go on; we won't interfere nor foller."

"Right kind o' yu, I'm shore," Green shouted back. "S'pose yu do the clearin' out. We're quite comfortable an' we won't interfere nor foller," he mimicked.

A hearty curse was the only response to this pleasantry and then the landlord who, whatever his other failings, was not deficient in pluck, hobbled into view, using his gun to save his damaged leg. Stiffy followed, and having removed their saddles and bridles from the dead horses they vanished round the bend in the gorge. In less than ten minutes they reappeared beneath the big tree, two of the horses carrying double burdens, the other two being required for the corpse, which was soon dislodged and tied across the saddle. The victors waited a while and then crept cautiously from the concealment. They need not have worried; rounding a far curve they could see the discomfited reward-hunters heading for Big Rock.

"An' I reckon if they ain't wiser they're a heap sadder," commented the younger man. "They've shore got a bellyful."

"Which reminds me we ain't eat since the last time," Green rejoined. "Why not rustle some grub an' can the chatter for once in a while?"

"Chatter? Me?" yelled the indignant youth. "I'm numb as a clam compared to yu. Why, yu make more noise for yore size than a tin pail full o' stones rollin' down a mountain, yu—hurdy-gurdy."

Which criticism called for and received only one answer. After the dust had settled, they arose and set about the proposed meal.

CHAPTER XIX

SOME days later the Crossed Dumb-bell ranch had two visitors but only the foreman was aware of it. Well after dark, Tarman and Poker Pete had ridden up and leaving their horses tied in the brush, had slipped unseen into Jeffs' quarters, where the big man related the happenings at Big Rock.

'Don't it beat all, the luck he has?' commented Pete, with an oath. 'We had him at the Y Z an' that fool-girl butts in, an' now them Big Rock idjuts have made a mess of it. I shore thought Scaife had sense.'

'It ain't luck, an' it's no good reckonin' on luck when yu play against him,' Tarman said. 'Yu got to outguess him. Any idea where he is, Jeffs?'

The foreman shook his head. 'We ain't seen hide nor hair of him,' he said. 'But I'm bettin' he's not far off.'

'He's gotta be located; turn California loose an' tell him to comb the country between here an' the Y Z. If he finds Green's camp, he's to show up casual like, an' make the play that yu were all expectin' him back here, an' that that crack on the head was a bit o' private spite on the part o' Gorilla. Then, an' this is the important bit, he's to let on that it's come out that Old Simon, owner o' the Y Z, has been usin' a fancy name ever since he hit these parts an' that his real name is Peterson. If that don't fetch Mr. Green to the Y Z pronto, I'm a bonehead, an' yu can bet yore lasn nickel he'll come painted for war. He's been lookin' for Peterson these three years.'

'Why for?' asked both the listeners at once.

'He claims that Peterson did the dirty on the feller who befriended him. Funny he should have gone to work for the very man he come here to kill.'

'But if he's sweet on the girl, an' I reckon he is, he won't wipe out her dad,' objected Poker.

'There's a reason why that sentiment won't work,' grinned Tarman, who did not believe in telling more than he must. 'Anyways, if he comes to see the old man he'll shoot him, shore enough.' He smiled as he saw understanding dawn on them. 'Then we nail him, some of us havin' business at the Y Z about that time, an' we're shut o' the pair of 'em.'

'An' him havin' killed her dear daddy, the girl won't be anxious to turn him loose again,' Poker Pete said. 'My word, I gotta hand it to yu, Joe; when it comes to schemin' yo're there with the goods, but I figure yu may have trouble with Blaynes over the skirt.'

Tarman laughed harshly. 'Yu mean he may have trouble with me, don't yu?' he said. 'Blaynes will get what's comin' to him.' 'What about the Frying Pan?' asked the foreman.

'Owner seems a bin obstinate at present,' replied the big man. 'We'll have to lower the value of his property some yet, but there's plenty o' time for that; we'll put this other job over first.

Yu prime West an' don't tell him more than enough—he may have got friendly with Green.

He added a few more general directions, and then he and the gambler slid silently out, regained their horses, and took the back trail to Hatchett's Folly.

When Jeffs had hazarded the opinion that the outlaw was not far from the Crossed Dumb-bell ranch-house, his guess was a good one, for Green and Larry were within a couple of miles of him when he spoke. Since their return from Big Rock they had haunted the locality in the hope of finding out what was being done with the stolen cattle. At last their patience was rewarded, for four of the rustlers, one of whom was Gorilla, rounded up a small herd one morning and headed for the valley where Green himself had done some rebranding.

Surmising their destination, Green and the Y Z puncher made a leisurely detour which took them to the spot by a longer route. When they arrived, the work of changing brands was almost completed. Securely hidden among the brush which clothed the sides of the valley, they waited for the next move. This was not long in coming, for as soon as the last bellowing

steer had rushed from the little corral in which the branding was done, the herd was collected again and driven towards the end of the valley. Keeping well under cover the watchers followed.

Passing through a break in the wall of the valley, the herd climbed a long slope to a big, tree-covered plateau. Here the trailers, having had further to go, lost sight of it, but evidence of its passage was plain enough, and indeed, the trail was a broad, well-trodden one, and had already been used on many occasions. After winding in and out among the trees for some miles, it suddenly took a sharp dip, and save for some scattered clumps of brush the foliage ended.

'Jee-rusaleem!' ejaculated Green, reigning in, a proceeding Larry promptly followed. 'What a hide-out.'

The dip, which after the start, was a long and gradual one, ended at a narrow entrance to another valley, larger than any they had yet seen, for it appeared to extend for several miles, and to be, in places, nearly a mile in width. The floor was covered with rich grass and groups of willow and cottonwood indicated the presence of water. Unlike the other valley, this one had no sloping sides, being, so far as they could determine, enclosed by perpendicular walls of rock. At the foot of the slope, they now saw the rustlers and their charge pass through the great stones which formed a natural gateway, while spread about the floor of the valley were many other herds. The two friends looked at each other, the same thought in both minds. It was Larry who voiced it: 'The blame country's just made for rustlin',' he said. 'What are they keepin' 'em for—there must be over a thousand head there?'

'That's the gang's part o' the plunder, I reckon,' Green replied. 'When Tarman has got hold o' the Y Z an' Frying Pan range he'll buy back these herds, or his men's share of 'em! It's the ranches he wants, an' he's only stealin' the cattle to get the land cheap an' pay his hands. He's playin' a big game, is Mr. Tarman, an' it's a safe bet he's double-crossin' his own friends.'

'What we goin' to do now?' asked Larry.

Put 'em up; I got yu covered,' came a hoarse command from the surrounding bushes.

A touch of the spurred heel sent Larry's horse into the air and at the same instant came a shot which scorched Green's neck. Like lightning, the puncher sent three bullets into the bush from which the smoke was spiralling, and a grunt, followed by the crash of a falling body showed they had not been fired in vain. For some moments the two men waited tensely, guns ready, for any further demonstration, but nothing happened. Dismounting, they forced their way into the bush. Sprawled before them, a neat hole between his sightless eyes and a distorted sneer on his misshapen lips, was Gorilla.

'We're gettin' careless, Larry,' Green said. 'We oughtta noticed that there was only three with the herd when they struck the valley an' then we'd have known that one of 'em was watchin' the trail. We gotta get rid o' this'—he pointed to the body—'it tells too much.'

A deep crevice between two rocks, with more stones on top to protect it from wild creatures, formed the dwarf's last resning-place. His horse they found tied to a tree not far away and turned it loose. A glance at the valley showed a thin wisp of smoke; apparently the rustlers had not heard the firing and were about to feed before making the return trip.

'Well, I owed that jigger somethin' but I didn't know I was payin' a debt,' Green mused. 'Odd how things work out. I never did nothin' to him an' yet he hated me at sight. We'd better be movin'.'

'Where for?' asked Larry.

'Frying Pan. We gotta put Leeming wise to this place in case we both get rubbed out.'

'Yu allus do see the bright side, don't yu? Awright, awright, we'll go to Job; he'll give us

somethin' better to eat than pig's belly, anyway.'

Green grinned. 'Yu certainly do make a Gawd o' yore innards, don't yu?' he said. 'We'll have a look at my claim on our way.'

'Yore what?' yelled the boy.

'I ain't deaf, an' I ain't a mile away,' exposnulated the other 'Didn't yu know I gon a gold-mine? If yo're a good boy...'

But Larry consigned both him and the gold-mine to a place good boys know nothing about, and raced off. Green followed more leisurely, a demure glint in his eyes. Some hours later they halted for a meal of the despised bacon and then pushed on, reaching the spot where Green had cached his mining outfit late at night, too tired to do more than roll up in their blankets and sleep. When Larry awakened in the morning it was to see his friend squatting by a fire, tending a pan from which an odourmuch more delightful than that of bacon was coming. He sprang up and took a peep.

'Trout, by the Jumping Jiminy,' he exclaimed. Where'd yu get 'em, Don?'

'Caught 'em lookin' for worms in the long grass, yu chump,' laughed the other. 'Don't yu know fish allus come ashore to feed in the early mornin?'

'An' the wise worms take to the water 'bout the same time on that account,' added another voice, and they looked up to find West grinning at them. "Lo, Green," he went on. 'I was ridin' right by when I got a whiff o' them trout. Might there be enough for three?'

'Shore, but four would be too many,' replied the puncher, meaningly.

'I'm as lonely as the devil at the prayer-meetin', an' durned glad to see yu again,' replied California. 'What's happened? We been expectin' yu back at the ranch.'

He got down as he spoke, tied his horse, and took a seat at the fire. The other two watched him closely. His pleasure at the meeting seemed genuine, and it was quite possible that he did not know of the treacherous trap which had been sprung upon the Y Z man.

'Yu ain't heard?' Green asked, as he passed over a generous portion of the food.

'There's bin tales told but I don't reckon I've heard the straight of it,' the visitor returned.

'Jeffs claims that he never knowed yu was missin' till they were halfway home; then we heard one o' the Y Z boys had bumped yu off. Next comes the news that yu ain't cashed but they've got yu, an' then we hears that yu got away an' the marshal's tore hisself near baldheaded.'

'It was Gorilla who knocked me cold, West,' Green explained.

'The hell it was!' said California. 'Well, he may have bin actin' on orders, or he may not—he's a bitter, mischievous devil—but yu gotta remember that yu thrashed the Spider, an' he ain't noted for a forgivin' nature. I suspicioned somethin' was up an' I warned yu to be on the lookout.'

'I ain't forgettin' that,' Green replied. 'Jeffs send yu to look for me?'

'Shucks! I happened on yore camp just like I said. I warn't lookin' for yu an' I warn't lookin' for no ten thousand dollars neither; that sort o' money never appealed to me.' He rolled a cigarette, and then remarked casually, 'Funny about Old Simon.'

'What was that?' asked both his listeners.

'Hatchett's is tickled to death over it,' laughed the rustler. 'He's bin carryin' on like a scalded pup 'cause yu give him a name that warn't yore own, an' now it comes out that his name ain't Petter, nor even Simon.' He drew at his cigarette, exhaled the smoke slowly, and continued, 'Changin' names is common enough in these parts an' ain't no crime, but the feller as does it oughtn't to complain if others do it too.'

'Seems fair,' agreed Green. 'What have we gotta call Old Simon now?'

'Well, it 'pears his right name is Les Peterson—Les bein' the short for Leslie,' came the careless reply, but the speaker's eyes were watching the other closely. He saw nothing more than polite, amused interest.

'The old catawampus—he shore oughtta be ashamed of himself,' the puncher observed.

'Wonder how many sheriffs is lookin' for him?'

West was nonplussed, though he guessed the other man was bluffing him. He had given the information as instructed, and although he did not know its significance to Green, he had expected it to produce an effect of some sort. Defnly he changed the subject.

'Am I to tell Jeffs yu ain't comin' back?'

'Nope, tell him I am—later,' said Green, and he smiled grimly.

West was clearly uneasy. He liked the puncher, and would have warned him had he known what to warn him against, but he was a mere unit in the gang, a tool in the hands of the rogues who did the scheming. So that all he said was, 'Well, don't forget yu gotta friend there when yu do.'

'I ain't likely to—I got none too many,' smiled the outlaw.

When the visitor had mounted and gone, Green sat staring in silence at the fire, pondering on the astounding news which had come to him so strangely. Fate had presented him with a pretty problem. Here was a man for whom he had been searching for years with one object only, to fight and kill or be killed himself. Always he had held that the cruel wrong done to his benefactor could only be wiped out in blood. And now to learn that the hunted man is the father of the girl of his dreams, or at least, all the father she has ever known. 'It would be the same; I just couldn't do it, old feller,' he muttered, unaware that he was speaking aloud.

Up to this point Larry had respected his friend's silence, but the spoken remark was too much. 'Say, when yu done chatterin' to yoreself yu might tell a feller what it's all about an' see if he can help yu,' he suggested.

Green roused himself. ' "Out o' the mouths o' babes" idea, eh?' he quoted, smiling.

'Awright, grandpa,' grinned Larry. 'Fly at it.'

The amusement soon faded from the young man's face as he listened to the story, and consternation took its place.

'Ain't it just hell,' he said, when the tale was done. 'Yu can't hurt Old Simon; he ain't a bad sort, an' it would break Miss Norry all up.'

'I know that, yu chump,' was the reply. 'But I gotta see him.'

'We gotta see him, yu mean,' corrected Larry. 'Wonder if West knew yu'd be interested to hear Old Simon's real name?', 'Couldn't 'a' been—I never mentioned Peterson to anyone round here. What's bitin' yu, anyway?'

'Dunno, but it shore seems odd his happenin' along like that. It looks...'

'As if we're careless an' damn lucky,' interjected Green. 'It might just as well have been Blaynes, or another o' that rustlin' lot, an' we'd 'a' been cold meat. C'mon, we'll shove for the Y Z an' watch our chance.'

Larry gave in, but he was not satisfied. To visit the Y Z just now appeared to be sheer madness, but when he pointed this out the only answer he got was that this very reason made it possible.

'They won't be lookin' for us,' Green argued.

'Wish I was shore o' that,' grumbled the other.

However, he offered no further opposition for he saw that it would be useless; his companion

was determined to prove the truth of the story he had heard without delay, and to settle accounts, though not in the way he had intended, with the man he had sought so long. For the boy knew that, so far as Sudden was concerned, Old Simon was safe, though he had been guilty of an offence for which death was the inevitable penalty; the abduction of a child could hardly be less heinous than the stealing of a horse or steer. He fell to studying the man riding silently beside him, grim and saturnine, and some conception of the power of human passions came to him. Here was a man who could be ruthless with his fellows, who had killed and would kill again if necessity arose, instantly abandoning a just vengeance cherished and pursued for years because it would hurt a girl.

'It's odd,' he said aloud, unthinkingly.

'What is?' asked Green.

Larry did not want to say; he hesitated and looked round for an excuse. They were crossing a wooded ridge, and between the trees over towards the place they had come from a thin pencil of smoke stabbed the sky. Even as he looked it was cut off, and then shot up again. He pointed towards it.

'Somebody signallin' back there.'

Green looked at him doubtfully; he did not believe that was what he had referred to, for Larry's back had been to the smoke when he spoke. While they watched the signal ceased and reappeared three more times, then faded out.

'Do yu reckon it might be West?' asked Larry.

'No tellin' an' it's too far away to investigate,' came the answer. 'Yu seem sot on the idea that his meetin' up with us wasn't an accident.'

'I was studyin' him mighty careful. This may be all a dodge to get yu to the Y Z.'

'I'm agoin' to risk it anyway, but there's no call—' 'We done settled that a'ready.'

They resumed their way, leisurely, for they had no desire to reach the ranch before dark.

Slow, as they were, however, it was barely dusk when, hidden in the thick brush bordering the trail, they saw the ranch buildings a quarter of a mile distant. Larry tied his pony.

'Yu stay here,' he said. 'I'll sneak up a-foot an' have a look-see.'

Green nodded, and rolling himself a cigarette, sat down to wait. Presently his quick ear caught the sound of hoof-beats and peering out he saw Noreen cantering down the trail. Evidently she had been for one of her afternoon rides and was returning home. He noted, with an ironical spasm of satisfaction, that Tarman was not with her and that she was riding Blue. After a moment of indecision, he stepped into view, removing his hat as he did so. The girl would have ridden past, but the horse, with a little whicker of pleasure, came straight to him. The cowpuncher smiled bitterly as he fondled the velvety muzzle.

'A feller was sayin' to me the other day that some hosses are pretty near human but I reckon he understand the facts,' he said.

The girl bit her lip and her face flushed, but she made no further attempt to resume her way.

'What are you doing here?' she asked angrily, and then, noting that he hesitated, she added,

'Don't trouble to think up any lie; I know that you are waiting for my father, whom you believe to be one of the men you told me you were looking for, and you want to kill him for some fancied grievance. Oh, if only I had known.'

The man she lashed listened apparently unmoved, though her scorn and contempt were hard to bear.

'I reckon yu got me wrong,' he said patiently, while wondering how she knew. 'I came

intending to see yore—father, but I ain't goin' to hurt him.' He saw the question in her eyes.

'He's got to apologise,' he finished.

'To you?' she asked stormily.

Green shook his head. 'No,' he said solemnly. 'To a dead man.'

'What do you mean?' the girl queried, impressed in spite of herself by his demeanour. 'Is this one of your so-called jokes?' For an instant the steel-blue eyes flashed fire and muscles of his strong mouth corded in the effort to maintain his self-control. The girl shivered; she had had a glimpse of a strong man suddenly stirred to anger, and it frightened her. But in a moment the storm had passed and the man's face was set, passionless, immobile again.

'Won't you tell me?' she asked.

'Yore father must do the explainin',' he replied. 'I'm givin' yu my word that he's safe, but I've gotta see him, an' I'm goin' to see him. I'm comin' in peace an' I'll go in peace, but if there's any trap laid, well, I guess graves'll be wanted to-morrow. Tell yore father that.'

His voice was harsh, rasping, implacable, and Noreen realised that he was not to be turned from his purpose, and that even did he walk straight into an ambush he would come to the ranch. She nodded dumbly, and the cowpuncher, having pushed the head of the unwilling roan back towards the trail, vanished into the bushes.

When the girl had gone, Green sat down, took out his guns and spun the cylinders to make sure the weapons were in perfect order. He had done his best to ensure that his meeting with Simon should be a peaceable one, but he was not going unprepared for the alternative. He had some black moments when he fell to considering what the girl must be thinking of him, and whether it would be better to have told her the whole story. With a shrug of his shoulders he dismissed the idea—she would not have believed him. Presently a twig crackled and Larry appeared.

'Yu make near as much noise as a herd stampeding,' was the greeting he received. 'Got any news?'

'All is quiet around the old homestead—too quiet for my likin',' replied the youth, ignoring the insult to his trailing ability. 'Didn't see hide nor hair of anyone 'cept the Pretty Lady. She come bustin' in on Vesuvius lookin' some flustered, pushed him in the corral an' hurried into the house. What yu been sayin' to her?'

The older man smiled at the boy's quick-wittedness and gave an account of the interview.

'Guess that makes it easier—lucky she came along,' Larry commented. 'She was about our on'y chance o' seein' the Old Man without his goin' on the prod. I don't reckon there'll be any surprise party now.'

'Then yu better wait here for me—no use yu gettin' any deeper in this mess.'

'Skittles! I'm in to my ears now, an' I'm aimin' to stay in.'

'Yu ain't goin' alone, ol'-timer, an' yu can bet a stack on that.'

Green, having expected nothing else, raised no further objection. Leading their horses, and keeping under cover as much as possible, they started for the ranch-house.

Simon, alone and ill at ease, was sitting in his office, watching the window which opened on to the verandah. Yielding reluctantly to his daughter's plea that he should see the cowpuncher, he had stipulated that she must go to her room. This that she might be out of danger, for he did not believe that the outlaw's profession of peace was sincere. Nevertheless, being not lacking in courage, he meant to play fair. So intent was he on the window by which

he expected his visitor to arrive that he did not hear the door, which was at the side of the room, open. Then a quiet voice said:
'Peterson!'

With a sudden start the rancher turned and saw that Green was in the room. Leaning nonchalantly against the wall, his thumbs hooked in his cartridge-belt, the outlaw was regarding him curiously. Here was the man whom for three long years he had wanted to kill. The grin on his face was not pleasant to see, and Simon's right hand instinctively moved nearer to the gun at his hip.

'Don't yu,' warned the visitor, and now there was a deadly chill in his tone. 'I could kill yu before you got it out but I've gone back on Bill Evesham an' promised not to harm yu. What I've come for—'

The sentence was never finished, for at that moment a hand pushed open the window, and a triumphant voice cried, 'He's here, boys; c'mon, we've got him this time.'

Green whirled savagely on the rancher, his gun flashing into his hand. 'So yu laid a trap, did yu?' he snarled. 'I oughtta to kill yu for that, yu skunk, but—'

He sent a bullet crashing into the window and a curse came out of the darkness. Almost at the same instant another shot rang out and Old Simon staggered and collapsed on the floor just as Noreen, aroused by the shooting, rushed down to find Tarman standing by the door, a smoking revolver in his hand. 'What has happened?' she cried. 'Is Daddy—'

'Sudden has shot him,' Tarman said. 'I heard he was comin' here but I arrived too late. I had a shot at him but missed. We'll get him; the place is surrounded.'

'Stand aside, please. I am going in to my father.'

Tarman shook his head. Too risky; there's hot lead flying in there an' some of it might get yu.' 'Which is why you are outside, I suppose,' the girl retorted, and pushing past him flung herself on her knees by her father's body.

Through the swirling smoke Green caught the one look she gave him—a look of horror and loathing. The men outside were firing at the wrecked window, and the outlaw realised that to remain longer in the room was to risk not only his life but that of the girl. To retreat by the way he had come was not possible, for he had seen Tarman at the door and guessed that he was not unaccompanied. Reloading both guns, he sent a hail of bullets ahead of him and sprang out of the window. From the darkness came spiteful flashes of flame and bullets hummed past his ears. A face, indistinguishable in the gloom, rose before him to vanish when he fired. Hands clutched at him and fell away before the hammer-like blows of his pistol-barrels for the weapons were empty now and he could not recharge them. Shrieks and oaths filled the air, and down towards the bunkhouse lights were moving and men were shouting.

Striking blindly right and left, the outlaw forced a way to the edge of the verandah, and leaping the rail, vanished into the night. He had not gone twenty yards when a guarded voice said: 'This way, Don, to the right.'

Swerving, he almost staggered into Larry, waiting with the horses by the side of the trail. Gasping for breath, with every muscle in his body aching, and bleeding from several bullet grazes which now he had consciousness of, Green was but just able to reach the saddle. Consumed as he was with curiosity, Larry forbore to put questions, but led the way on the trail for Hatchett's at full speed. Only when they were clear of the ranch he spoke:

'Where do we go?'

'Leeming's first, they won't look for us there. We'll turn off through the dry gulch 'bout a

couple o' miles along.'

The gulch referred to had a surface of bare rock and would show no tracks. Not until they were through this and riding rapidly across the open range did Larry break the silence. Then he said:

'I'd 'a' took a hand in the game my own self but I reckoned we'd want the hosses in a hurry mebbe. So the Old Man set a trap for yu, after all?'

'If he did he got caught in it himself,' Green told him. 'I'm afraid he's cashed—no, I didn't shoot him, an' I dunno who did. I thought he'd double-crossed me but when I saw Tarman at the door...'

'Tarman there?' interrupted Larry. 'Didn't I tell yu that feller West was up to some devilment, eh?'

'Well, it does look like yu mighta been right,' Green agreed, 'though how Tarman could know I wanted Peterson beats me. I figure West didn't know what he was lettin' me in for.'

'O' course not, him bein' a little tin angel,' said the boy disgustedly, and there was a tinge of jealousy in his tone which made his friend smile.

'No, I guess this country ain't strong for angels,' he returned. 'In fact...'

'Yu on'y know of one, an' I'll lay at the present moment she's thinkin' yu killed her daddy,' Larry finished, bitterly.

'She couldn't think nothin' else, seein' what she saw,' Green pointed out. 'Yu gotta admit it was a pretty neat frame-up—disposes of me an' Simon if it comes off, an' leaves Tarman holdin' all the aces. He's got brains, that feller.'

'I'd like to make shore o' that,' was the other's grim reply. 'Push along, yu blunderin' skate, yu ain't hobbled.'

The latter part of the remark was addressed to his mount, and was uncalled for, since the animal was already travelling at full stretch, and considering the mileage it had covered that day was doing remarkably well. Green slowed down a little.

'No need to bust the hosses,' he said. 'They can't trail us in the dark an' they ain't a notion where we'd make for. Why do you reckon Tarman stains his hair an' beard?'

"Cause he's a double-dyed villain, like yu read of in the storybooks,' chuckled Larry.

'Yo're a double-ended jackass an' neither end's got any sense. If Leeming turns us down...'

'Shucks! I don't never ford a stream till I come to it,' said Larry confidently. 'Job's got savvy, an' he ain't no more use for Tarman than we have.'

To which came no answer. Wounded and utterly played out, the outlaw remained in his saddle by a sheer effort of will. To him, in his weakened condition, the position appeared desperate. With her father dead, the girl would be absolutely in the power of Tarman and his gang, and the charge of having killed Simon, which he could see no way of disproving, would set the hand of every man in the territory against him. True, he was playing against a stacked deck, but who would believe him in the face of Tarman's statement, backed by the testimony of the bereaved girl? Leeming was his only hope; if the Frying Pan owner failed him, Tarman would win, but—and the outlaw's jaws clamped on a bitter oath—he would not enjoy his victory for long.

Daylight had not yet come when they reached their destination. Three owl-hoots at spaced intervals—a signal already agreed upon—aroused Leeming and brought him to the back door. Blanketing the window of the sitting-room, he lighted the lamp, and then uttered an oath of amazement when he saw Green collapse in a chair. Snatching open a cupboard he produced whisky and glasses, and then vanished into the kitchen, returning presently with

food.

'Yu shore look as if yu been in a free-for-all scrap, Green,' he said. 'Take a shot o' whisky an' some grub 'fore yu chatter.'

The visitors were glad enough to take the advice. The food and drink put new life into the outlaw, and when his wounds, which were but scratches, had been attended to, he was ready to tell his story. Rolling and lighting a cigarette, he looked steadily at his host.

'Might as well get the worst over at once,' he said. 'Old Simon is dead, I guess, an' yu will be told I shot him. I didn't, but the evidence is good enough to hang me.'

'Simon dead?' cried Leeming, and now they saw a strange thing, for this man who over a trifle could fly into a violent passion, in a matter of deep concern now kept iron control of himself. 'Tell me about it,' he said quietly.

Step by step the outlaw detailed what had happened since their last meeting, the visit to Big Rock, the fight in the gorge, the encountering of West, and its tragic outcome at the Y Z. Leeming did not interrupt, but sat with his eyes fixed on the narrator's face.

'An' Tarman's tale will be that he heard I was after Simon an' that he came along with a posse just too late to prevent me killin' him,' Green concluded.

'Yu think Tarman did it?' Job asked.

'Him or one of his men. O' course, it might have been meant for me but I wasn't nowhere near Simon. I on'y fired one shot before he went down, an' that was at the window.'

'Why did yu go to see Simon if yu'd given up the notion o' bumpin' him off?' came the next question.

The outlaw looked embarrassed. 'Well, I reckon yu will think it a fool's fancy, but I wanted to hear him say he was sorry for what he done to Evesham,' he explained. 'Bill was like a father to me, an' I figured there was an apology due to him an' aimed to collect it. A kind o' mad idea, but that's how I felt.'

The owner of the Frying Pan stood up. 'I'm takin' yore word, Green,' he said. 'It's a bad business an' we gotta think out what's best to be done. Yu boys better hole up here for a day or so—I reckon the Frying Pan won't be looked over for rustlers.' He smiled grimly, and continued. 'We can hide out yore hosses, an' my boys can be trusted to keep their traps shut. We'll let Mister Tarman make the next move.'

The faith of the rancher braced the outlaw as nothing else could have done. Looking him square in the face, he said, 'Yu are shore white, seh, an' I'd have to be worse than my reputation to double-cross yu. We'll get yore cattle back.'

'Damn the cattle,' exploded the other. 'What I want is for that little girl at the Y Z to get her rights, an' not be made unhappy!'

He stamped off, motioning them to follow, and having shown them where they were to sleep, voiced a gruff good-night, and stamped back to his own room, heartily ashamed of himself for having betrayed emotion.

CHAPTER XX

THE Y Z ranch on the following afternoon presented its usual appearance save for the smashed window and bullet-scored walls of the room where the fight had taken place. Most of the outfit, with a large contingent from Hatchett's, were away with the marshal scouring the country for traces of the outlaw. In a bedroom lay Simon, grievously wounded, but likely to pull through. The bullet, entering his right side, had passed out again, miraculously missing

the vital organs, and though painfully weak from the shock, there were no signs of fever. He was listening to Noreen's account of what had happened after he dropped, and his expression was troubled.

'So he got away, eh?' he asked. 'Well, I'm glad o' that.'

The girl looked at him in astonishment, for as she well knew, he was not prone to forgive those who transgressed against him. For a moment she feared the fever might be commencing, but his eyes were clear and his voice steady as he proceeded: 'No, I ain't out o' my head, girl, but I'm beginning to think I may have got that feller sized up wrong. He could 'a' shot me an' didn't, not even when he thought I'd stacked the cards against him. 'Nother thing, Green wasn't near the door an' that's where the bullet as downed me come from.'

A sudden suspicion clutched at the girl's heart and her voice shook as she whispered, 'Tarman was at the door, and he had just fired at Green,' she said. 'You think...?'

'I think I've been a damn fool, my lass,' replied the old man, 'an' with me laid out like this we're in a tight place. We gotta walk in the water an' not let on that we suspect anythin' crooked. The trouble is I dunno who to trust.'

'Snap Lunt, Dirty, Ginger, and Simple are straight, I feel certain,' Norry replied.

'Yu send Snap up to me on the quiet, an' spread it around general that I'm in a bad way an' not liable to get over this.' The girl went out, and a little later Lunt slid into the room, gripping his big Stetson by the crown and obviously ill at ease in a sick-room.

"Lo, boss, how're yu makin' it?" he greeted. 'Fine as silk, Snap, but there's reasons why I want it reckoned I'm liable to cash in,' replied the invalid, and proceeded to state them.

'I knowed it,' said the gunman. 'Sudden don't work that way. If he wanted to put yu out he'd invite yu to pull yore gun an' get busy; he ain't no pot-shooter.'

'What do yu know about Tarman, Lunt?' asked the ranch-owner.

'I can't tell yu, boss; I've give my word,' replied the other. 'Green put pretty much the same question to me an' got the same answer. All I can say is that I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw a steer. He's takin' charge an' Rattler an' most of the outfit ain't objectin'.'

'But some are, eh?' queried Simon.

'Well, me, Ginger, Dirty, an' Simple claim that Tarman don't pay our wages,' grinned Snap.

'Good. Yu tell them boys how things are, an' that I'm relyin' on them to lookout Miss Norry's game for her now I'm in the discard; there's some rough trail ahead of us, Snap, but we'll make the grade.'

'Shore we will,' replied the gunman heartily as he went out.

When Tarman returned to the ranch in the evening after a busy day spent in searching for the outlaw, he found Noreen very depressed and soon elicited the information that the wounded man seemed no better. His endeavour to hearten her appeared to be genuine, but the girl, possibly because she was looking for that very thing, found a false note in it.

'Don't yu worry, Miss Norry,' the big man said. 'He'll pull through—yu can't kill these old-timers with one bullet unless it's a heart or head shot. An' if he shouldn't, well, yu got friends now.'

There was an intimacy in his tone which she hated, but she took good care not to betray her feelings. So she shared the evening meal with him and his companion, Laban, and listened with apparent interest to his account of the attempt to run down the fugitive, rejoicing

inwardly at its failure; the knowledge that he had kept his word and not injured her father had made her attitude to the outlaw a very kindly one. When she returned again to the sick-room, the two men sat smoking and talking in low tones. Laban, who was now fully in the confidence of his master, did not seem to be entirely satisfied with the way things were going.

'Bah! Yo're losin' yore nerve, Seth,' Tarman said, with a sneer. 'The old man's as good as done for, an' when we get that chap Sudden, we take every trick.'
'S'pose the girl won't marry yu,' suggested Laban.

'What else can she do, even is she don't want to?' asked the other. 'Simon signs a paper makin' me a partner in the ranch—if he don't, I'll sign it for him; he cashes an' the place belongs to me. The girl can't claim—she ain't no relation to him. I'm her only safe bet an' if she don't see it that way, there's means to make her.'
'Sounds all right,' Laban admitted, 'but that outlaw gent sticks in my gullet; I'll sleep a heap easier when he's stretched hemp.'

Tarman laughed. 'He can't escape—there isn't a man in the territory that wouldn't pull a gun on him at sight now.' 'Don't yu be too shore o' that, Joe,' warned Laban. 'There's some in this outfit that wouldn't an' Lunt is one of 'em.' 'Is that so?' frowned the big man. 'Well, we owe Snap some-thin' already. Jeffs had better put Gorilla on him.'

'Gorilla's gone—vanished complete,' Seth told him. 'Went with three more to the main herd, stopped behind to make shore they wasn't followed, an' disappeared. His hoss drifted in next day. Looks to me as if Sudden had found out who give him that tap on the head, an' got even.' Tarman sat thinking, a heavy pout on his lips. Then he laughed again, and callously said, 'Well, things is straightenin' out an' there's too many of us anyway.'

'I reckon,' returned Laban, with a mirthless smile, for the sentiment was one with which he entirely agreed. Gorilla was a mere tool, to be used and paid or discarded, and the fewer there were when the clean-up took place, the bigger the gains for the rest.
On the following morning Tarman insisted upon seeing the sick man despite the girl's protest that he was not well enough to receive a visitor. Pushing her aside, he entered the room and closed the door. One glance at the pallid, sunken face on the pillow confirmed what he had been told—it seemed impossible that the old man could survive.

'Well, Simon, how're yu comin' along?' he asked.
'Reckon I ain't a-comin', I'm a-goin', bun yu needn't tell Norry I said so,' replied the invalid, with a weak attempt at a smile.
'Shucks, yu mustn't talk like that,' Tarman said. 'Now, see here, yu needn't worry about anythin'. I'm goin' to stay at the Y Z an' look after things, so all yu gotta do is set yore mind on gettin' well. I wouldn't 'a' troubled yu this mornin' out it'll help me considerable if the outfit knows I'm part owner o' the ranch. I ain't carryin' enough cash to settle the deal around with me but I can give yu a draft. I've written out the agreement an' all yu gotta do is sign it.'

Simon shook his head feebly. 'Guess it'll have to wait, Tarman, I ain't in no condition to do business,' he said. 'You spoken to Norry yet?'
'No, nothin' definite, but I reckon she knows,' replied the other, striving to keep the irritation he felt from his voice. 'What's the use o' delayin'? This place needs a man to handle it just now an' yu won't be in a fit state to tackle it for some time.'
'It'll have to wait,' reiterated the sick man, and although Tarman went on to argue the question at greater length, he stuck to his decision.

'Well, it's yore say-so, o' course, but I claim yu ain't treatin' me fair? Peterson,' the big man said meaningly. The ranch-owner's face flushed at the name and the implied threat, but before he could reply the door opened and Noreen entered.

'Time's up, Mr. Tarman,' she said. 'I cannot allow my patient to be bothered with business any longer.'

'I've been tryin' to fix things so that he won't be troubled with it at all,' was the reply. 'So long, Simon; keep a-smilin'.'

He went out, after telling the girl that it was worth while being shot up to have such a nurse, a compliment which did not produce the effect he intended. Noreen had no illusions about him now, and when she heard of his attempt to get hold of the ranch, her temper flared up.

'The coward, to try and bully you into doing that when you are so ill,' she cried. 'Don't sign anything, Daddy.'

The old man assured her that he had no intention of doing so and the girl was satisfied, but she found it difficult to appear friendly with the unwelcome guest. This difficulty increased as the days passed and Tarman acted more and more as master of the ranch and of herself. Had it not been that the invalid claimed most of her time she would have resented this, for she would have seen more of it than she did. It was Snap who opened her eyes fully.

'Blaynes has got orders to give Ginger, Dirty, an' Simple their time,' he said. 'Mebbe yu ain't heard?'

The girl stared at him in astonishment. 'Orders? From whom?' she asked.

'Tarman, I s'pose; I'm bettin' high the Old Man never give 'em,' said Lunt.

'I should think not,' the girl cried indignantly. 'What have those boys done to be turned off?'

'They were friendly to Green, an' they ain't made any secret of it.'

'They are not to go—I will speak to Mr. Tarman. Have you any idea where Green is now, Snap?'

'I ain't, Miss Norry, I wish I had. Tonk an' his posse have combed the country an' ain't seen a trace of him; he seems to have vanished complete, but I'm dead shore he's around.' He watched her walk back to the house, his face set grimly. 'An' he'll stay around too, as long as yu need him, or I'm a gopher,' he muttered. 'An' if he don't, I will.' Noreen found Tarman in the office, which had been resnored to a state of neatness again. The sight of him sitting at her father's desk drove discretion to the wind and she plunged at once into her business.

'I understand that you are dismissing some of the men,' she began. 'Is my father aware of it?' Tarman looked at her in surprise; this was a different Noreen, and he suddenly realised that instead of a chattel to be disposed of at his will, she had become a factor to be considered, and one requiring careful handling.

'It wasn't worth while botherin' yore father,' he explained. 'Blaynes complained to me that the men were insubordinate an' I told him to get rid of 'em. This isn't a time no carry men who are not loyal to the ranch.'

'These men are,' she replied shortly.

'Then you don't trust yore foreman's judgment,' he argued.

'I prefer to rely on my own, and my father would agree with me,' she retorted. 'I will not have them sent away.'

There was no mistaking the note of determination in her voice and Tarman hesitated for a moment, pondering the best course to pursue. Her opposition enraged him, but he fought down his anger and smiled instead.

'Guess it ain't worth quarrellin' about—a man oughtta give into a girl, specially when it's the girl,' he said indulgently, and then, noting her look, he added, 'I'm presumin' that Simon told yu what we was both hopin'—that yu an' me would tie up?'

'You certainly are presuming, Mr. Tarman,' Noreen told him. The question of "tying up"—to you or anyone else—is one I have not yet considered.'

Despite his hardihood, the man flushed. 'I'm clumsy—ought not to have put it just that way,' he excused. 'I ain't no ladies' man, Miss Noreen, an' I can't make pretty speeches. The straight of it is, I want yu—want yu bad. Will you have me?'

The girl was silent, studying this, her first real lover. Big, handsome, virile, many a woman would have asked no more; but Noreen, inexperienced in the world as she was, had seen beneath the surface and she profoundly distrusted Tarman. Besides—but that was a reason she would not admit, even to herself. She shook her head. 'I'm sorry, Mr. Tarman,' she said.

'Think again, girl,' he urged. 'I've got money an' I'll make more. We needn't stay here; after a spell we can sell out an' travel; see the world an' see it in style. I'm buildin' big an' as my wife you'll be somebody. Who else around here can offer yu as much?'

"And the Devil took Him to a high mountain and showed Him all the cities of the world and the glories thereof," ' the girl quoted softly, and again she said, 'No, Mr. Tarman.'

This time there was a finality in her tone which even his egotism could not ignore; he saw that she was not to be persuaded and a black anger welled up in him. Was he, Tarman, who had broken men and brushed them out of his way like flies, to be bested by a chit of a girl? A hard look came into his eyes as they rested on her.

'Yu are takin' a high hand, girl, but there's one or two points yu are overlookin',' he sneered. 'First off, I'm part owner o' the Y Z.'

The purchase price is not paid, nor the agreement signed.' 'Shucks ! Mere formalities. It's all settled an' Simon ain't the man to go back on his word, even if he dared. Besides which'—and here he grinned in savage anticipation of the blow he was about to deal—'what's it gotta do with yu? Yu was talkin' about presumin' a while ago. Well, yu are presumin' yo're Simon's daughter an' all the time yu ain't no relation to him.'

For a moment she stared at him in utter amazement, and then she laughed contemptuously.

'You must be mad,' she said. 'Perhaps you can tell me whose daughter I am?'

'Shore thing,' came the reply. 'Yo're Mina, short for Wilhelmina, only child of Bill Evesham, who used to have a ranch on Crawlin' Creek, Texas. A man named Peterson stole yu when yu were a kid an' brought yu here; he now calls himself Simon Petter.'

Though the girl's eyes were incredulous, her brain was telling her that the man was speaking the truth.

'Evesham was the chap who befriended Sudden, an' set him on the hunt for Peterson—an' he got him,' Tarman went on. Almost she cried out that it was a lie, that he himself had shot Simon, but with an effort she restrained herself; after all, she was not sure. Her mind in a whirl, she was conscious of one recurring thought—that for years Green had been searching for her—with a vengeful motive, doubtless, but still, searching for her. In some intangible way the knowledge gave her courage.

Tarman watched her gloatingly, well aware of the effect of the blow so ruthlessly dealt. His eyes roamed over the slim, rounded, youthful figure lustfully, and the girl's attitude of despair gave him only a sensation of savage triumph. He wanted her—he meant that she should oe his, but first he would crush her to the very earth.

'So now yu know where yu get off,' he continued harshly. 'If the old fool cashes—an' by the look of him he's due to—I'm yore best bet. I can turn yu adrift without a dollar if I like, an' if yu are cherishin' any notions about that feller Sudden, yu better lose 'em; he'll be stretchin' a good rope before long.'

The girl straightened herself up and said stormily, 'I'd sooner starve than be beholden to you for anything.'

'Starvin' is none so easy, 'specially for folks who have lived soft an' had all they wanted,' he sneered. 'Reckon yu will change yore tune when the pinch comes. 'Nother thing yu gotta keep in mind, if Simon does get well he's liable to be sent to the pen for abduction, if the boys at Hatchett's don't lynch him first.'

She had not thought of this and her face paled at the possibility, for what she had learned could not obliterate the affection of years and the old man was very dear to her. More than ever she realised how completely she was in the power of the leering ruffian before her. But she would not let him see it.

'Have you anything else to say?' she asked, and when he did not reply, she swept from the room.

The man watched her go with narrowed, squinting eyes and a clamped jaw.

'Guess that'll hold yu for a bit, my girl,' he grated. 'Later on we'll take some o' the stiff enin' out o' yu. Dunno, though, seem' we've come to a showdown, it wouldn't be as well to—'

He paused, and after a moment's consideration, got up and went in search of Laban.

Noreen meanwhile, in the seclusion of her bedroom, was pondering on her strange position. Save for the sick man and the old Indian housekeeper she had no one to turn to, and both of these were helpless. Then she thought of Leeming and decided to go and see him. She went to make sure that Simon was comfortable, but said nothing of her purpose, nor of what she had learned, not wishing to give him more cause for worry. The ranch appeared to be deserted when she went to the corral and saddled Blue. She wondered if the three punchers had already been sent packing and peeped into the bunkhouse, only to find it empty, even the cook being absent. So she rode away, unaware that cunning eyes were watching her every movement.

She had covered a bare couple of miles and was passing along a brush-filled arroyo when a movement in a thicket made her pull in. Ere she could start again, a rope swished and settled about her shoulders, while another dropped over the head of her mount. Dragged from the saddle, she had a brief glimpse of masked faces and then a blanket was thrown over her and secured by a rope which also confined her arms to her sides. A gruff voice gave an order and she felt herself lifted and flung across a saddle.

'Best lead the roan, safer, huh?' she heard one of her captors say.

'I reckon,' came the answer, and then she knew in whose hands she was, and that Tarman had scored again.

CHAPTER XXI

'WHAT'S up now?' muttered the owner of the Frying Pan as he emerged from his doorway and saw three riders approaching at a leisurely pace. Evidently catching sight of him, they swung their hats and let out a cowboy yell which put instant life into the heels of their mounts. In a few brief moments Leeming was looking into the grinning countenances of Ginger, Dirty, and Simple. His quick eye noted that each man had his warbags tied to the cantle of his saddle.

'Howdy, boys, what can I do for yu?' was his greeting.

`Give us jobs if yu can use us,' smiled Ginger. `We're shore homeless.'
`Yu left the Y Z?' queried Leeming incredulously. `How come?'
`Tarman don't like us none, that's how,' chimed in Dirty. `What's he gotta do with it?'
`He's runnin' things—claims he's part owner o' the ranch, an' Simon bein' a pretty sick man there ain't no one to call his bluff,' explained Ginger. `Blaynes shore eats out of his hand.'

`Huh! I'm agoin' over to see Simon this mornin',' said Job. `Yu boys go down to the bunkhouse an' put yoreselves outside a good breakfast. Tell Dirk that yu are all on the Frying Pan payroll till the Y Z wants yu again, an' that'll be just as soon as I've had a word with the Old Man.'

`Yu wouldn't like us to come back with yu?' suggested Simple, hopefully.
`I just would, but it won't do,' grinned the Frying Pan owner. `Simon was talkin' o' letting Tarman in on the Y Z an' its just possible he's done it; if so, we should be on the wrong side o' the fence. Wait till I've seen him. Heard anythin' o' Green?'
`Not a damn whisper,' replied Ginger. `Reckon he's jumped the reservation this time.'
`Well, it ain't no loss—we don't want no darn outlaws cavortin' round here,' returned Leeming.
`Mebbe he is an outlaw, but he's a man, an' I'd sooner have him oack o' me than most o' the fellers who're huntin' him,' retorted Ginger hotly, and wondered why his reply made the cattleman smile.

At the bunkhouse they needed no introduction and found a hearty welcome, being known as good men, but they got chaffed.

`This outfit is gettin' some brainy,' observed Lucky Lomas. `Three "Wise heads" at one gather; Old Simon is shore losin' his intellects.'
`An' the Frying Pan is shore gettin' what it needs,' grinned Ginger, as he dumped his saddle, slid into an empty seat and reached for the nearest dish, an example his friends lost no time in following.
`How's the Old Man makin' it?' asked Dirk presently, when the newcomers had taken the edge off their by no means small appetites. Ginger, remembering Snap's injunction, shook his head.

I ain't seen him myself, but Snap says he's mortal bad,' he replied. `That feller Tarman's actin' as if he owned the whole shootin' manch a'ready.'

The foreman grunted. `Mebbe Job'll have a word to say about that,' he said, `an' I reckon he can say it with a chorus, eh, boys?'

The response was unanimous and had Tarman been there to hear it he would certainly have been less self-satisfied; the Frying Pan outfit, with its whole-hearted admiration for its irascible boss, was a tough problem, and with the help of the Y Z boys was certain no give a good account of itself.

`That misfit of a marshal still outlaw-huntin'?' asked Charlie, and when Ginger nodded, he went on, `He came prancin' round here yestiddy, lookin' for Green. My ghost, yu oughtta heard the Old Man lace into him; some o' the things he said would've raised blisters on most men.'

`An' Tonk was hoppin' mad but he didn't dare pull his gun,' supplemented Woods. `He stood there with his own men grinnin' at him, babblin' about his representin' the law. "Yu?" yells Job. "The law's sunk pretty low if it's gotta be represented by an ugly, busted-down whisky-keg like yu. Hit the trail mighty brisk or the law'll be shy o' the poorest marshal that ever noted a badge." Tonk gave him a black look an' says, "I'll not forget this, Leeming." The Old

Man laughed in his face, an' says, "Which you'd better not, if yu want to live," an' the marshal slunk off like a whipped dog.'

'Job shore has got a poisonous tongue bun he's white to his toenails,' commented Lucky. With the disappearance of the last cup of coffee a move was made to the corral and Dirk began to apportion the day's work. The roping and saddling of mounts was in full swing when Dirty, with a shout and a waving arm, turned all eyes on the horizon.

'There's a visitor a-comin' an' he's shore fannin' it,' he exclaimed.

Far out on the plain they could see a horseman, bent low in the saddle, heading for the ranch at full speed. Leeming, who had also seen the approaching rider, now joined the group at the corral.

'Looks like Snap,' said Ginger. 'He allus crouches in the saddle when he's goin' fast—claims it helps the hoss by decreasin' the wind resistance. Wonder what's up?'

'P'raps he's downed Tarman an' they're after him,' surmised one of the Frying Pan boys.

'Snap ain't the runnin' kind—he'd stay an' shoot it out with 'em,' Leeming said.

A few breathless minutes, and the pony, a savage-eyed bunch of nerves and steel wire slid to a stop in their midst, sending the grey dust flying. As Ginger had guessed, the newcomer was Lunt. He got down, trailed the reins and turned to Leeming.

'Howdy, Job? Miss Norry here?'

'Ain't seen her,' replied Leeming. 'Why?'

'She went out ridin' yestiddy afternoon an' never come back. She didn't go to town 'cause I've been there to see, an' so I reckoned she musta come here. Look's like somethin's happened to her.'

'Hell's bells ! What's come to this damn country?' cried Leeming, his face suddenly scarlet with passion. 'What do yu reckon has happened to her?'

'How do I know?' replied Snap quietly. 'She was ridin' Blue, an' the hoss may have turned ugly—yu never can tell with these outlaw hosses. Or she may have met up with 'Paches or rustlers. I'll gamble a month's pay she ain't stayin' away from the Old Man of her own free will.'

'Yo're shoutin',' said Job. 'By heavens, if I find a feller that's dared to lay a finger on that girl I'll scalp him alive!' He glared at the men around him and suddenly became aware that they were doing nothing. 'What are yu gapin' at me for, yu goggle-eyed misfits?' he yelled. 'Get yore hosses an' some grub, an' put a jerk in it. No more work'll be done on this ranch till the girl is found. Comb every mile o' the blasted country. Yo're in charge, Dirk. I'm goin' over to the Y Z to have a chat with Mr. Tarman; report there to me.'

He turned and went back to the ranch-house, leaving his grinning outfit to prepare for the search, which it did with no further loss of time. Food, weapons, and horses were soon secured, and the men split up into parties and started in different directions.

'Ain't he a shinin' wonder?' confided Lucky to the smiling Y Z men. 'There ain't another chap in the Territory we'd take nhat line o' talk from an' he knows it, cuss him.'

The object of this compliment—for such it was—did not trouble any more about them; they had their job, and he knew it would be thoroughly done. He himself went straight to the room where Green and Larry were passing the time wrangling over a game of crib. The impressions caused by his news were in odd contrast. Larry was instantly all excitement and anger, while his companion sat silent, only the tightened jaw muscles and narrowed eyes telling that he had heard.

'What we goin' to do?' asked the younger man, who was striding up and down the room.

`Yu might try settin' down an' shuttin' yore face for a start,' said his friend sardonically.
`Yo're actin' like a scared hen.'
`Yu ain't actin' at all—that's why I'm askin',' retorted the other hotly, but he nevertheless took the hint.
`What d'yu make of it?' asked Job.
`I figure it's Tarman,' replied the outlaw slowly. `Mebbe he thinks he can crowd Simon into concludin' the sale, or he's forcin' the girl to marry him. There's another possibility—it may be a ruse to skin yore ranch o' folks an' pull off a big raid. Yu sent all yore boys on the hunt?'
`Every darn one barrin' the cook,' Leeming said. `That last's a chance I gonta take. I'm leaving for the Y Z now; too bad yu fellers can't take a hand.'
`We're aimin' to,' Green said. `Where'd yu cache our hosses?'
`In the old stable at the end o' this place—it ain't been used for years. There's a door into it from the house. Take anythin' yu needs.'

It was characteristic of the man that he asked no questions as to their movements and made no attempt to dissuade them; in local phraseology, it was a case of letting every man skin his own meat.

No sooner had he gone than the others followed. Packing up a supply of food, they found their mounts, and by keeping the ranch-house between themselves and the bunkhouse got away unobserved by the solitary cook, who was enjoying an unlooked-for holiday smoking and reading in his bunk. Not until they were clear away did Larry ask where they were going.

`We'll ride straight to the Crossed Dumb-bell. If we find she's there, yu can fetch Job an' his boys an' we'll clean up the bunch.'

The younger man had no objections to offer and they crossed the intervening Y Z range at a good speed, headed again for the trail which skirted the Sandy Parlour desert. They passed groups of cattle but saw no riders, and the line-house was deserted. Green smiled grimly.
`Looks like they ain't afraid o' warwhoop rustlers no more,' he commented. `All the same, Job shouldn't 'a' left the Frying Pan wide open; Tarman ain't the kind to miss a chance like that.'
`Huh! We know where to find the cows anyways,' said his companion. `We'll get 'em back when the showdown comes, yu bet, yu.'

`An' it won't be long now,' Green responded. `If Tarman has Miss Norry, he's overplayed his hand. Even Hatchett's won't stand for that, an' Job has friends there too.'
They pressed steadily on, mile after mile, keeping for the most part to the trail used by the rustlers; only now and then they saved distance by leaving it and forcing their way through a wood or brush-filled gully which was more direct and possible for horsemen not hampered with a herd of cattle. Around them the birds sang, the sunlight filtered through the foliage and tiny streams whispered merrily on their way to join larger ones. Among the patches of big timber the solitude was complete and the hoofs of the horses made no sound on the thick carpet of pine needles.

Green had no eyes for the beauty through which they passed; outwardly calm, he was inwardly consumed with rage at the thought that Noreen might be at the mercy of a man like Tarman, and his one aim was to get to her as quickly as possible. Since his companion was equally eager they wasted no more time than was necessary over their meals. So it came about that it was still light when they neared their destination and halted to settle upon a plan of procedure. Securely hidden in the thick undergrowth, they could see the ranch buildings a

few hundred yards away. Two spirals of smoke showed that they were occupied, and the number of ponies in the corral suggested that most of the men were about. Slipping from his own mount, Green cautiously worked his way to a position from which he could view the animals in the enclosure. Presently he was back again, his face hard with anger.

'Her hoss is there an' it's a safe bet the girl is in the ranch-house, where the foreman lives,' he said. 'I'm goin' to get her. If yu don't hear nothin' from me in an hour, fork yore cayuse an' fetch Job an' the boys.'

Larry demurred. 'We'd stand a better chance if both of us tackled the job. This messenger-play don't appeal none to me.'

'Don't yu ever use that head for anythin' but keepin' yore ears apart?' asked his friend sarcastically. 'No, it ain't a bit o' good yu cussin' me, yu gotta do as I say, she's the on'y trail out. So long, an' don't yu come bustin' in if yu hear guns goin'. Head for the Y Z, pronto.'

'But, see here—' began Larry, and then discovered he was talking to the empty air. 'Blamed idjut,' he concluded, and sat down to wait.

Green crawled to a point where the bushes most nearly approached the buildings, and then, in the deepening dusk, darted across the open space and gained the rear of the ranch-house. The door proved to be latched only and cat-footing along a passage, he came to another door, partly open, from which a gleam of light shone. Peeping in, he saw Jeffs sitting at the table, laboriously inscribing figures on a sheet of paper before him. Apparently the task was both a pleasant and engrossing one for he was smiling, and did not notice the gradual opening of the door and the entry of a visitor.

'Stick 'em up,' came a curt command.

With a jerk the foreman's head lifted, and his hands quickly followed when he saw the weapon and realised who held it. 'Sudden?' he gasped.

'All o' that,' responded Green grimly. 'Now, speak low an' talk straight. Where's Miss Petter?'

'Never heard of her,' replied Jeffs sullenly.

'Don't lie,' Green told him. 'Yo're about two seconds from hell right now. Come clean or The tone betrayed no anger but there was a cold deadliness in it which told the other that he must speak or die. He was a brave man and had gambled his life on a chance many a time, but here there was no chance.

'There's a skirt upstairs in a back room,' he admitted. 'Some-thin' Spider took a fancy to, I s'pose. I dunno who she is.' 'Stand up an' face the wall,' Green said shortly.

Stripped of his weapons, gagged, and tied securely in his chair, Jeffs still eyed his captor's movement with a sardonic expression which, had Green noted it, might have aroused his suspicion, but his mind was too full of his purpose. Having fixed the prisoner to his satisfaction, he set out in search of the girl. The first two rooms he came to were open and empty, but the door of the third was locked.

'Yu there, Miss Norry?' he asked, in low voice.

'Yes,' came the reply. 'Who is that?'

He told her, with a warning to stand clear while he burst the door open. One thrust from his powerful shoulder broke the flimsy lock, and the light of a guttering candle disclosed her sitting on a ramshackle bed, her bound hands before her.

'No time to talk,' he said, as he severed her bonds, stuffing a curse when he saw where the thong had chafed her wrists. 'We gotta get outa this. Larry's waitin' with the hosses.'

Cautioning the girl to follow him as quietly as possible he stole down the stairs. All went well until he had nearly reached the bottom and then his foot caught in a rope and he pitched

headlong down the last few steps. As he fell, two men sprang upon him and a jarring blow on the head knocked the senses out of him.

He returned to consciousness to find himself in the room where he had left Jeffs a prisoner, but now the position was reversed, for his own wrists and ankles were tightly bound. As the mist caused by the blow he had received cleared from his brain, he realised the extent of the disaster which had befallen him, and how it had come about. Evidently after he had gone upstairs, Taxman and his gang had come upon the scene, and finding the foreman, had laid a trap. They were all there, these men who hated him, and were now watching him with malignant amusement. The girl was not present. Tarman greeted him with a mocking bow.

'This is shore an unexpected pleasure,' he sneered. 'If our welcome seems a trifle rough, yu must put it down to the boys' delight at yore return to the fold, an' their desire to keep yu with us for a little while.'

The victim's head was throbbing with pain, and he looked for nothing but death ere an hour had passed, but he forced a contemptuous smile to his lips as he replied :

'I ain't complainin','

'Spoken like a true knight-errant. The brave outlaw dashes to the rescue of the fair damsel an' runs his silly neck slap into a noose,' Tarman jeered. 'Bit reckless to tackle this job single-handed, wasn't it, Sudden?'

'Mebbe it was,' Green agreed. So they knew nothing of Larry, and by this time the boy should be well on his way to the Y Z. 'I reckon yu hold all the cards,' he added.

'Shore I do, an' what's more, I'm agoin' to let yu see how I intend to play 'em,' Tarman returned. 'After which, we'll attend to yore case.'

'Why not hang the swab right now an' have done with it?' suggested Dexter. 'He knows too much.'

Tarman whirled on the speaker with such a baleful glare that the Double X man instinctively shrank back.

'He'll know more before I've done with him,' he said. 'An' so will some others if they try an' ride me.' He waited a moment but Dexter had nothing to say. 'Now we'll get on with the business.'

Standing there, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt, he dominated them all, and even Green had to admit that man possessed power, misdirected though it undoubtedly was. Tarman was in a good humour, everything was coming his way, and the capture of the outlaw seemed to remove his last difficulty. But though he smiled, he watched the men before him warily; he was not of the trusting type.

'Here's how we stand,' he began. 'Old Simon is peggin' out, an' when he's gone the Y Z comes to me.'

'What about his daughter?' asked Blaynes. 'Ain't it willed to her?'

'She ain't his daughter—no relation at all, an' if there ever was such a will it don't exist now,' explained Tarman, and a meaning chuckle went round the room. 'The Frying Pan is wide open—Leeming an' his outfit are lookin' for what they won't find, an' to-morrow mornin' we go an' take what we want. I reckon then he'll be glad to sell on my terms, an' holdin' them two ranches'll give me the say-so in these parts. Then there's the cattle; after to-morrow's clean-up, there should be pretty nigh two thousand head, an' that'll mean a heavy wad o' money for every one o' yu. On top o' that, I'll be needin' men to run the ranches an' there'll be big pay for any or all o' yu. Don't make no mistake—I'm agoin' to swing a wide loop an' fellers who tie to

me get their share.'

'King o' the Rangers, eh, Joe?' Laban said.

Tarman laughed. 'Shore, an', boys, there'll be plenty pickin's, believe me.'

He paused and looked round, confident of the effect of his speech, and he was not disappointed. To Green's astonishment, the men seemed pleased; apparently they could not see that the big rogue had used them merely to grab the lion's share of the plunder himself. Tarman was clever; he knew that to these men land would have small appeal in comparison with the hard cash to be realised by the sale of the stolen cattle, and that in all probability his followers were thinking they had the better of the deal. But all of them were not so satisfied, for Blaynes had listened to his leader with a face which grew more and more discontented. Evidently things were not panning out as he expected.

'What yu aimin' to do with the girl?' he asked, and there was a hint of hostility in his tone.

Tarman looked at him. 'I'm aimin' to do what—I—please,' he said coolly.

'She was to be part o' my share; yu said it,' Blaynes rasped, his voice husky with anger.

'I hadn't seen her then,' Tarman grinned, and several of the others laughed.

The Y Z foreman did not join in. Standing in the middle of the room, slightly crouching, with head thrust forward and malevolent eyes, he was indeed the human presentment of a reptile about to strike. Even his voice had a hiss in it.

'She was promised to me an' I mean to have her—an' a share in the ranch,' he said. 'Double-cross me, Tarman, an' I'll put a crimp in yore schemes if I have to give myself up to the Governor o' the Territory to do it.'

Tarman regarded him curiously, alert for the slightest movement; he knew the man meant what he said and that tragedy threatened. He had expected trouble over the girl, but not that Blaynes would push it to the point of open insubordination. In a moment he had made his decision.

'Hell's bells, there's plenty o' pretty girls, Blaynes,' he laughed, 'but if yo're set on this one, well, yu shall have her—when I've done with her.'

The taunt was deliberate, intentional; it was a challenge, and a deadly silence followed it. For a heart-stopping half-minute Blaynes stood as though frozen, only his eyes glaring hatred at the man who mocked him. Then the fingers of his hanging right hand slowly opened claw-like, and with an almost inarticulate oath he snatched at his gun. To the onlookers the reports seemed to be simultaneous, but then, through the swirling smoke, they saw the Y Z foreman stagger under the shock of the heavy bullet, and, as his knees gave way, pitch forward to the floor, his weapon clattering beside him. Twisting in a last agony, he shook his fist at Tarman and cried :

'Damn yu, Webb, yu got me, but yore own time ain't far off, yu treacherous hound.'

He rolled over and was silent. Tarman, his gun poised for a second shot, watched him with narrowed, relentless gaze. Then, seeing that all was ended, he thrust the weapon back into the holster.

'Well, boys, yu all heard what he threatened an' seen him go for his-gun,' he said. 'Anybody want to take up his end of it?'

'Even break; he got what was comin' to him, the sneakin' cur,' said Pete, and that seemed to be the general opinion.

'Good enough,' Tarman resumed. 'His share goes into the main fund—I don't want none of it.'

Two of the men carried the corpse into another room, and on their return Tarman said, 'Now we gotta settle what to do with our friend here,' and he waved a hand towards the prisoner. 'Hands up for stretchin' him right away.'

Every man in the room, save one, elevated a paw, several jocularly put up both. Tarman looked round with a grin.

'Hell! yu don't seem to be none popular in this community, Sudden,' he commented. 'There's on'y one as ain't anxious to see you dance on nothin'. What's yore objection, West?'

'Well, boss,' replied California, who alone had kept his hands down, 'here's how I look at it. This feller's worth ten thousand wheels alive, an' nothin' dead, an' it 'pears to me a waste o' good money to swing him when there's folks who'll pay that amount an' do it for us.'

'Yes, an' give him a chance to tell his little tale,' interposed Dexter. 'Where'd we be then?' 'Where we are now,' retorted West. 'Yore head's about as useful as it is ornamental. Who's goin' to take the word of an outlaw agin the fellers who gave him up? Why, yu couldn't find a better way o' stoppin' any gab there may be. I can see a public vote o' thanks bein' passed to our prominent citizen an' landowner, Mr. Tarman, for accomplishin' what half-a-dozen sheriffs have fallen down on.'

'By God, he's right, boys,' Tarman cried, his imagination caught by the prospect. 'That's a tally for yu, West, an' when we come to cuttin' up the beef I'm not forgettin' it.' He turned and grinned at the captive. 'Yu have a few more weeks to live, Mr. Sudden.'

Green did not answer; the last words of Tarman's latest victim were still ringing in his ears. He knew now that this was the man for whom he had searched so long. He was bigger, for he had filled out, and with the addition of a beard, and his dyed hair, it was not to be wondered at that Green had failed to recognise him under his assumed name, for he had seen him but a few times at Evesham's ranch. 'The Spider' might have suggested something but curious nicknames were the rule rather than the exception in the West. Tarman stepped in front of him.

'I take the pot, my friend,' he jeered. 'Thought yu could play a hand against me, did yu? As for the girl...'

'Keep yore foul tongue off her,' blazed the bound man. 'If yu had the courage of a coyote, yu'd turn me loose an' fight it out, but yu haven't; swindlin' old men an' bullyin' unprotected girls is yore limit.'

The big man's face grew purple with rage and he ground his teeth. 'For a busted nickel I'd ante up ten thousand no the boys for the pleasure o' blowin' yu apart,' he snarled.

'If I had a busted nickel I'd shore give it yu,' Green returned, adding contemptuously, 'Yu'd only rob me of it if I didn't.'

But Tarman had got himself in hand again. 'Yu don't get off that easy,' he said. 'Live, damn yu, with a rope in sight, an' to comfort yu, the knowledge that the girl is in my power an' I don't intend to marry her, savvy?'

The prisoner remained unmoved. 'Tarman or Webb or whatever yore name may be, I figure yo're the poorest pretence of a man I ever struck—an' I struck yu once good an' plenty, didn't I?' he jeered.

Tarman's face went livid and his fists clenched. 'Here, West, yu an' Durran lock this feller up an' keep an eye on him,' he gritted, 'or I'll be savin' the hangman a job yet.'

Assisted by West and followed by Durran, the outlaw shuffled up the stairs. On the way, West managed to whisper: 'It was a close call, partner; I couldn't think o' no other way. I ain't

forgettin' that rattler.' Then he thrust him violently through a door, slammed and locked it upon him.

CHAPTER XXII

EARLY the following morning, Stiffy, returning from Hatchett's, heard a drumming of hoofs behind him and being of a suspicious nature, forced his mount into the brush at the side of the trail and waited. The drumming grew louder and then a band of riders galloped past. In the half-light he recognised several of them. He saw too that the horses had been hard-ridden, and that the faces of the riders were set and determined.

'Looks like the Frying Pan outfit, fifteen of 'em, an' they ain't on no joy-ride neither,' he muttered. 'Headed for the Crossed Dumb-bell shore enough. I gotta take the short trail an' warn Jeffs.'

Mounting again he rode for about half a mile and then turned off to the left at a point where there was a faint, narrow trail, little more than a run-way for wild creatures. A glance showed him that the horsemen ahead had kept straight on, and with a sigh of relief he plunged into the narrow pathway, stooping to avoid the branches which threatened to sweep him from the saddle.

The next half hour proved cruel work, and but for the fact that both knew their business, either man or beast must have come to grief. Through thickets and gullies, over rock-rimmed ridges, along a trail which wound like a ribbon amidst seemingly impassable undergrowth, slipping, staggering, the nimble little pony keeping its feet by a miracle of agility, they pressed on until at length they emerged on an open stretch and with a last burst of speed, reached their objective. All was quiet, but the man knew he could not be far ahead of the visitors and wasted no time. Limping, for the wild ride had tried his wounded leg severely, he ran to the door and hammered on it with his quirt. It was Jeffs who opened it.

"Lo, Stiffy, what's eatin' yu?" he asked. 'Thirsty?'

'The Frying Pan outfit's on its way here an' liable to arrive any minit,' panted the other. 'I come the short trail but—well, yu know what that is. There's fifteen of 'em, an' I reckon they're painted for war.'

'Hell,' cried the foreman, the grin fading from his face instantly. 'Come an' tell the Spider.' They went into the big room where Tarman, Pete, and most of the others were getting breakfast. The leader took the news calmly, and was clever enough to let it appear that he welcomed the change in his plans.

'Fine,' he said. 'We clean up now instead o' later on, an' if they come askin' for it, we can't be blamed. Fifteen of 'em, eh? Well, there's twenty of us an' we're under cover. Rustle in plenty grub, water, an' cartridges—we'll hold this place. The Frying Pan outfit, boys, is the last ditch we gotta straddle; after that, it's easy goin' for all of us.'

Laughing and joking, the men set about the task of putting the ranch-house in a state of defence. Built of stout logs which would resist any bullet, it was admirable for the purpose. The vulnerable spots were the doors and windows, the latter, however, being protected by heavy shutters loop-holed to enable the attacked to retaliate. On all sides the ground had been cleared so as to render the storming of the building a perilous undertaking. So the garrison might well await the issue with confidence. But Tarman, though he showed a bold front to his men, was perplexed. That the ranch he was purposing to raid should suddenly turn the tables was something he could not understand. Poker Pete too was ill at ease.

'Beats me how Leeming got wise to this place,' he said.

'I figure Green warn't alone last night,' Tarman replied. 'He musta left the other feller waitin' in the brush with orders to ride for help if he didn't come back with the girl in a certain time.'

We oughtta thought o' that. We gotna wipe 'em out, Pete, every damn one of 'em.'

The gambler nodded gloomily, not that the prospect of slaying a dozen or so of his fellow-creatures disturbed him, but because he realised that the task was not going to be an easy one. A hail from outside interrupted the conversation, and peering through the loop-hole, they saw a solitary horseman sitting easily in the open, his rifle across his knees. It was the Frying Pan owner himself. At a word from Tarman, the foreman flung open the front door and leaning carelessly against the jamb, asked: 'An' what might yu be wantin'?'

'First off, none o' yore damn lip,' retorted the irascible rancher. 'I'm tellin' yu we got the place surrounded, an' I'm givin' yu one chance; hand over the girl an' Green unharmed an' we'll go away—this time.'

'Yu can go plumb to hell, an' if yo're in sight in five seconds yu'll git a free pass there,' snapped Jeffs jerking up his rifle as he spoke.

The envoy whirled his mount and disappeared in the chaparral, while the foreman slammed and bolted the door; negotiations were at an end.

The attacking party, having placed their mounts in safety, had split up into couples and selected points which commanded every side of the building. The four Y Z boys had worked round to the back, from whence they could keep an eye on the corral. As Larry put it, 'Some o' these birds may be wantin' no fly the coop, an' it's shore up to us to provide the wings.' Ginger, with whom he had paired, grunted as he settled himself at full length in a slight hollow, well screened by the intervening foliage.

'Don't yu gamble too high on this brush bein' bullet-proof,' he warned. 'Cuss it, they got all the best of it. Don't see how we're goin' to get 'em 'less we starve 'em out, an' they're better fixed for grub than we are, I betcha.'

'We'll get 'em all right,' responded Larry cheerfully. 'Old Impatience'll find a way—can't see him a-settin' down to wait. Bet that's him, opening the ball.'

A shot rang out and they heard the thud of the striking bullet. Three of the defenders promptly replied, one of them firing from a loop-hole in the back door which immediately became a target for four of the attackers.

'Reckon we've sorter discouraged that jasper some,' remarked Ginger, the hail of bullets having evoked no response. 'Wonder if he's cashed or shifted?'

He raised himself slightly to get a better view and instantly his hat was snatched from his head, and a second bullet screamed through the twigs past his cheek, both coming from the loop-hole of a window near the door. Larry sent two rapid shots at the unseen marksman and promptly rolled sideways to a position several yards away.

'Yu darn fool,' he said. 'Why don't yu stand up an' tell him where we are?'

Ginger did not reply, but having found a ridge of ground which afforded a little protection, he began methodically to hurl lead in a way which aroused the curiosity of his chum.

'What yu firin' at?' Larry inquired.

'The sky, yu blamed jackass,' came the polite retort, and then, 'I'm cuttin' them hinges; take the left-hand one if yu think yu can hit it.'

Larry peeped out and saw that the shutter to the window was held in place by two rawhide hinges fixed at the top, and that the one on the right already bore testimony to the accuracy of Ginger's marksmanship. With a whoop of delight Larry got to work on the other, and had already cut it through when a voice behind said :

'How yu boys makin' it?'

It was Snap Lunt, sent oy Leeming on a tour of inspection to see how his men were faring.

"Lo, Snap; yu fellers got any of 'em?'"

'Dunn; that blamed house is a nut that wants crackin'. What yu shootin' at?'
In a few words Larry explained the idea and the little gunman was filled with admiration.
'She's a great scheme,' he said. 'Yu hit on that all oy yoreself, Larry?'
'Nope, got Ginger to help me think of it,' replied Larry, modestly.
Snap laughed. 'I'm agoin' to pass the word all around,' he promised. 'That shack won't be safe for a flea if we put them shutters out of action. Got any baccy?'
'Yeah, an' papers, an' matches, an' a lip to hang the pill on; want 'em all?' asked Larry sarcastically.

'All 'cept the lip,' returned Snap, helping himself generously from the bag the other threw to him.

When he had crawled away, for the vicinity of the two Y Z punchers was no place to stand upright or linger in, Larry resumed his task of destroying his particular hinge. Though the short range rendered this a not too difficult mark, the necessity of moving after each shot complicated the business, for the besieged fired upon the slightest provocation. Twice Larry had been burned by a passing bullet and presently a hearty string of expletives from his companion indicated that he too was finding the work warm.

'Where'd he get yu?' queried Barton.

'Right through the brain, yu chump,' came the petulant reply. 'Come an' tie this blasted arm up; I'm bleedin' like a stuck hog.'

'An' squealin' like one too,' retorted Larry. 'Brain, huh? Why, they couldn't hit your'n with the gun close to yore head.'

He wormed his way over to where Ginger was lying and bound the ripped forearm. The firing was now increasing in intensity and there was a regularity about it which pointed at a definite plan.

'Snap's passed on our idea, shore enough,' Larry said, complacently.

'Our idea,' cried Ginger. 'Well, yu shore wasn't out o' sight when the gall was distributed; yu'll be claimin' it was yores soon. I—'

'Aw right, I ain't deaf,' Larry said. 'Trouble with yu is yu talk too much. That blamed shutter's nearly cashed. I'll finish her off an' yu be ready to shoot when she drops.'

Two accurately placed shots severed the right hinge and the sagging shutter, tearing away the other support, fell to the ground. Ginger fired instantly and they saw a man lurch forward and subside. Larry's shot followed and another indistinct form seemed to fade away. No return shot came from the window.

"Pears like we got 'em both," remarked Ginger, and then, 'There's another shutter goin'—see—the other side o' the door. That'll be Simple an' Dirty. Reckon we got these coyotes where the hair's short now.'

The whine of a bullet which missed him by an inch cut out his jubilation and sent him burrowing, while Larry plugged a couple of shots into the window. A reply came instantly and it was Larry's turn to curse, for the lead ploughed through his hair.

'Sufferin' snakes!' he ejaculated. 'I feel like I've been scalped.' Ginger crawled over and examined the wound. 'On'y a graze,' he said. 'If I had yore luck I wouldn't work for a livin'.'

'Yu don't anyways,' snorted the injured one.

The discovery of the weak spot in the defence, while it proved an expensive surprise for the rustlers, by no means justified Ginger's optimistic views. The exposed windows were quickly barricaded with mattresses, planks, and other articles calculated to impede the progress of a bullet, and the fight went on as fiercely as ever. That the defenders had suffered was evident since fewer shots came from the building, but they were still strong enough to make a rush

across the open too costly. So that Dirk, on his way to the horses for a further supply of cartridges, was not unduly hopeful.

'They've got two of us, an' some others is more or less chipped,' he said, in reply to Ginger's query. 'I reckon we've wiped out a few o' them too but 'less we get the house afore dark they'll have a chance. Yu boys all right?'

'I'm scratched an' Larry's got a permanent part in his hair, but he- won't look any uglier,' replied the redhead. 'We're claimin' to have downed a couple, anyways.'

'Good for yu,' said the foreman, and went on his way.

The situation inside the ranch-house was more critical than the attackers suspected, for the unmasking of the windows had cost seven of the rustlers their lives, and several others were wounded. Nevertheless, like cornered rats, they were prepared to fight to the bitter end—all save one, for Tarman, conscious that the game was now going against him, was already framing a scheme by which he might save his neck. This plan he proceeded to put into operation with a callous disregard for the fate of the men who were fighting for him. Stealing away unnoticed by those to whom a second's inattention to the work in hand might mean death, he went up to the room where Noreen, bound and gagged, was lying on the floor.

Carrying her downstairs he placed her near the back door of the house, which, owing to the assiduous efforts of Simple and Dirty had quickly become too dangerous a spot for defence. Then he opened the door a little and instantly two bullets crashed into it.

With one quick movement, Tarman slung the almost senseless girl across his shoulder and stepped out. A cry of astonishment and rage greeted his appearance, but as he had calculated, not a shot was fired, though half a dozen guns were aimed at his heart and as many fingers were itching to pull the trigger. For a moment he stood motionless, a grin of satanic triumph on his face, and then strode steadily towards the corral.

'Any attempt to interfere with me an' the girl dies,' he called out, and they now saw that in addition to the rifle in his left hand, his right held a revolver.

Dastardly as the threat was not one of the onlookers doubted but that it would be carried out, and the Recording Angel must have a busy time during the next few minutes. Larry, who had sprung up in readiness to intercept the ruffian before he reached the corral, subsided with a curse when Ginger growled: 'Don't be a damn idjut; can't yu see the hound has got us throwed an' tied? P'raps he'll leave her an' make his getaway.' But they soon saw that such was not the rustler's intention; he was taking no chances of being shot down.

Reaching the corral, he did not relinquish his helpless burden, managing to rope and saddle a horse without doing so. Secure in his immunity, he went about the difficult job quite leisurely and the limp form draped over his shoulder seemed to hamper him scarcely at all. To the impotent watching men the operation was a maddening one but they dared make no move. At length he was ready, and mounting, he swung the horse round.

'My promise still holds good; follow me and she dies, pronto,' he shouted, and with a sneering 'Adios' he plunged into the chaparral.

The rustlers defending the front of the house were not aware at first of their leader's defection, and those at the back did not realise his intention until it was too late to interfere. Green, from the slit which did duty as a window to the room in which he was confined, saw the whole proceeding and wrenched at his bonds in savage desperation. Suddenly the door opened and West came in.

'Couldn't make it afore—Durran had the key,' he said. 'Hold out yore paws.'

'Where's Durran now?' asked the prisoner, as the Californian cut away the lashings on wrists and ankles.

'Dead, an 'a good few with him, an' that dirty houn' Tarman has left us holdin' the bag,' replied the other, with an oath of disgust. 'Here's yore belt an' guns; the next room to this has a window yu can drop out of. Run that skunk down—I'd 'a' beefed him myself if it hadn't been for the girl.'

'This puts me in yore debt deeper than ever, an' I'll not forget it,' Green said, as he buckled the welcome belt round his hips. 'Nothin' to that,' said West. 'I gotta get back or I'll be missed. Good luck.'

The moment he had gone the prisoner followed. As West had said, the adjoining room, which he recognised as the one Noreen had been locked in, contained a fair-sized window. He was about to open it when a stealthy footstep sounded outside, and he shrank back so that the newcomer must enter the room in order to see the occupant. He could hear the approaching man's muttered words: 'Where in 'ell is he? Durran said the small room. Must be in here with the gal. Why ain't the door locked? Damn fools—' The door was pushed back and Poker Pete entered.

'Drop that knife,' came the curt command.

For an instant the would-be assassin hesitated, gazing spellbound at the man he had expected to find bound and at his mercy, and then, comprehending that he had no chance against the levelled gun, with the implacable eyes behind it, he opened his hand; the murderous weapon clattered and gleamed as it rolled on the floor.

'Who turned yu loose an' where's the gal?' gasped the gambler, who had been too busy at the front of the house to notice his chief's exit. He too knew that the game was up and had determined to secure his revenge on Green, whatever happened.

'Tarman used her to save his own dirty hide,' Green replied. 'As for yu, this is yore last hand.' He sheathed his gun as he spoke. 'I'm givin' yu an opportunity to play it like a man. Pull yore gun.'

'Fine chance I'd have again yu, wouldn't I?' said the ruffian, playing for time while his cunning brain sought a way out.

'A better one than I'd have had, tied, against yore knife,' came the stern retort. 'Pull, damn yu! I've got no time to waste.'

'I ain't invitin' myself to my own funeral,' said the gambler, and coolly elevated his hands above his head. 'Shoot away, an' be damned to yu.'

The cowpuncher looked at him in disgust. At the same instant Pete's right hand dropped to his neck, rose again and flashed downwards, the blade of the second knife glinting as he struck. To one unacquainted with the gambler's habits, the ruse would have been fatal, but Green had seen the trick before and was, moreover, expecting something of the kind. Quick as light, he sprang in, gripped the descending right wrist in his left hand and pulled the man towards him, at the same time driving his own right fist into the savage face. The impact, with all the impetus of his spring behind it, was terrific. The assassin, hurled back as though by a mighty mind, staggered and dropped in a huddled heap; a foot twitched and that was all. For a moment the cowboy stood, panting, waiting for the next move. Then, gun in hand, he stepped forward, but a glance told him the man was dead; evidently, in falling, his arm had twisted under him, and he had impaled himself upon his own knife.

The cowpuncher wasted no more time. Taking off his handkerchief he waved it out of the

window, and when no shots came, coolly climbed out and dropped to the ground. Then, at full speed, he ran for the corral. Larry's warning shout saved him from the fire of the attackers, but those in the house did their best to bring him down. But a running man who knows the tricks of unexpected swerves is a difficult mark, and Green dived into the sheltering brush unhurt, to find Larry awaiting him with a rope, saddle, and rifle.

'Good for yu,' gasped the late prisoner, as they raced for the corral.

The horses, scared by the shooting, were bunched together at the far end of the enclosure, but a whistle from Green brought the roan straight to where the two men stood waiting. In a few moments the saddle was on and Green mounted. Larry looked wistfully at the other horses.

'I'd give a year's pay to come with yu,' he said.

'Yu gotta stay an' help to clean up the mess,' his friend told him. 'Say to Leeming that Poker Pete an' about half the rest of 'em's cashed in there.'

He touched the roan with his heels and shot off in the direction Tarman had taken. Larry stood watching him until the angry 'spat' of a bullet striking a post beside him came as a reminder that he could be seen and reached from the ranch-house. Dropping to his hands and knees, he crept back to join Ginger, whose relief at his return was successfully concealed by a string of opprobrious epithets.

CHAPTER XXIII

AT first Green pushed the roan along at a good pace to make up for the start the quarry had obtained. He had this advantage, Tarman could not know he was pursued, and therefore was not likely to hurry unduly, the more so as his horse was carrying a double burden. The cowpuncher argued that the fugitive would make for the Big Chief range, through one of the passes in which he would be able to reach a town. Probably he would aim for Big Rock, where he had friends and could obtain supplies. The trail, which Green soon picked up, seemed to confirm this.

The firing from the ranch-house grew fainter and presently died away as the roan and its rider penetrated further into the wild country which guarded the lower slopes of the mountains. Though apparently heading for a fixed point, Tarman was breaking a fresh trail and making frequent detours to avoid obstacles. This helped the pursuer, who mounted on a superior horse, could make better time on the stretches of easy going.

For mile after mile Green pressed on, sometimes at full speed where a bit of open country permitted, at others at a walking pace, when the horse slipped and slithered down the side of a gully, rock and sand following in a miniature avalanche. Once, on the bank of a creek, the sign showed that Tarman had dismounted to drink. The footmarks in the soft sand were still slowly filling with moisture.

'He ain't so far ahead now, Blue,' muttered the cowpuncher. 'Oughtta see him soon.'

The fury that had possessed him when he saw Tarman carrying off the girl had now resolved itself into an icy determination of purpose. To an onlooker his actions would have seemed deliberate, even slow, but he was taking no chances. Having satisfied his own thirst and that of his mount, he rode on. Drawing his revolvers in turn, he spun the cylinders and made sure the weapons were ready for instant use. Then he examined the rifle.

'It's his own—the son of a gun,' he said. 'Well, needn't to worry 'bout yu,' he added, as he slid

the Winchester back under the saddle-fender, for Larry took more care of his weapons than of himself.

They were now nearing the mountains, and the scenery became still more savage and forbidding. The trail zigzagged upwards through dense forests of pine which almost shut out the daylight, along clefts strewn with boulders, and presently emerged on an open ledge which climbed round the side of a big spur and evidently formed one of the passes through the range. Less than half a mile away a horse was wearily plodding up the long slope under its double load.

Having got the girl so far, and with only one man to deal with, Green did not believe that Tarman would carry out his threat, and as concealment was no longer possible, he gave his horse the rein. As he had expected, the thudding hoofs of the roan were heard at once. Taxman gave one glance back and then spurred his mount, uselessly, as he soon realised. Another backward look told him that the pursuer was apparently alone. A savage grin distorted his face as he slipped to the ground and dragged his rifle from the scabbard.

Green saw the action and recognised that his foe had all the advantages. Tarman, with the girl behind him could not be fired at, while he himself was entirely without cover, and at a range at which a good shot could hardly miss. Nevertheless he rode steadily forward, watching and waiting; he had one chance in a thousand, and he knew it. The girl, bound and helpless, sat huddled upon the horse, watching too, with a cold terror clutching at her heart. When he was little more than a hundred yards away the cowpuncher saw Tarman raise his rifle and take steady aim. As the report rang out the roan reared, and its rider pitched sideways from the saddle, flopping awkwardly to the ground and lying motionless. Tarman stood for some moments, crouched slightly, his gun ready for a second shot. He saw the horse quieten down, pace forward, and sniff inquiringly at the prostrate form. 'Got him, by God!' he exulted.

A cry of despair from the powerless spectator brought a grin of malicious triumph to his lips. 'Sudden exit of Mr. Sudden,' he sneered. 'Reckon yu will have to put up with me for yore husband—or yore lover—after all. Some day yu will learn that when Joe Tarman goes after a thing, he gets it. I've got yu, the hoss is there, an' if those damn fools don't split about the cattle, I'll get them too.'

Sliding the rifle back into the sheath, he took the lariat from the saddlehorn and led the animal down the slope to where the cowpuncher was lying. He trailed the reins, and drawing a gun stood looking down upon his fallen foe. He could see but little of the face, which, turned downwards, was almost hidden in the curve of the left arm, but the outflung right arm and the sprawling legs told their tale. The rustler raised his weapon.

'Dead as mutton,' he said aloud, 'but I reckon I'll waste just one cartridge on yu for luck, my friend.'

He was on the point of pulling the trigger when Noreen's horse began to pitch and he turned to curse it, and her. 'Put 'em up, Tarman!'

The harsh command brought the rustler round like a flash and then—his hands shot heavenward. The cowpuncher was still lying prone but now there was a gun in his right hand. Slowly, and with his eyes fixed on the big man, he got to his feet. Looking into that stark, grim face Tarman could not repress a shiver of fear; the man who could risk such a ruse and lie motionless with a gun trained on him, was to be dreaded. Standing there, one hand holding aloft his pistol and the other the lariat, he waited for the bullet he himself would not have hesitated to fire. But again he had misjudged his man.

Put yore gun back,' came the order, and when he had complied Green holstered his own. 'Now Webb, or Tarman, whichever yore name is, I'm going to give yu what yu never gave any man yet—an even break. Pull yore gun as soon as yu want to.' He waited, his own hands clear of his gun-bunts, but the big man seemed in no hurry to accept the invitation. Instead, his lips curled in a wolfish snarl.

'Even break, eh?' he sneered. 'Knowin' damn well that yo're quicker'n I am. Makin' a grand-stand for the girl's sake, eh? Well, it don't go with me.'

'Then I'll take yu back an' hang yu with the other thieves,' retorted the puncher, drawing his gun and stepping forward to disarm his prisoner.

'If that damn hoss had kept still yu would be buzzard-meat by now,' growled Tarman, as he looked malevolently at Noreen. 'If I thought—'

'Keep yore thoughts to yoreself an' turn yore back,' ordered the other sharply.

Under the menacing grin, Tarman complied, but instead of making the half-turn he whirled completely round, at the same time slinging the heavy coiled lariat full into the face of the advancing man. Completely taken by surprise and blinded for the moment, Green pulled the trigger, but the shot went wide, and the next instant the weapon was struck from his grasp and his enemy was upon him. A savage blow sent him staggering back and when sight returned to his smarting eyes, Tarman's hands were reaching for his throat. He ducked and drove a fist into the gloating, furious face, but he could not evade the arms which closed round his body like a vice. Swaying, slipping, they reeled to and fro like drunken men. The puncher knew that the other was trying to throw and throntle him and he strove desperately to keep his feet and break the hold by pounding away at Tarman's ribs. That this hammering was beginning to tell he soon learned, for the bigger man's breath was coming in gasps.

Suddenly Tarman changed his tactics. Releasing his opponent, he slung in a terrific blow with his right which, had it landed, might well have proved fatal. But the puncher got his head away just in time and as the massive fist whistled past his ear, he sent in a return which drew a bellow of rage from the big man and brought him rushing blindly forward. The next few moments were a medley of whirling fists with no attempt at defence; both men were obsessed by the brute instinct to hurt, and the fight became one of insensate fury. To the bound girl who was the sole spectator it seemed impossible that such violence could continue. The thud of bone meeting bone or flesh sent a shudder through her and yet, barbarous as the scene was, she could non take her eyes away; they were fighting for her, and the issue meant more than life.

Backwards and forwards the bruised, blood-spattered figures heaved, neither appearing to gain any supremacy. Tarman's bulk gave him an advantage, but it was offset by the puncher's wiry toughness and superior condition. Every muscle in his body pulsed with pain, yet the blows went home and if there was less power behind them he had the satisfaction of knowing that the other man was in no better case. Tarman's gashed and gaping mouth, noisily sucking air into his labouring lungs, told a plain story of distress, and Green, reading it, summoned his remaining strength and again closed. A crashing blow to the jaw which he was too weak to avoid sent the big man headlong, and as he fell, his hand encountered a hard object in the grass. Green remained standing, waiting for the fallen man to rise, glad indeed of a moment's inaction. He failed to read the devilish look of cunning which the prostrate ruffian darted at him.

'Another grand-stand play,' Tarman sneered. 'Goin' to let me get up, eh?'

'I don't hit a man when he's down, even if he is a cur an' a coward,' retorted Green.
'Different here; I fight to win, an' take my chances,' the big man said, as he rose painfully to his feet, his right hand slightly behind him. 'Come on, yu

He lurched as he spoke, as though from extreme weakness, and the puncher fell into the trap. Refreshed by the respite, he sprang in to finish the fight. Tarman waited, a wicked light gleaming in his swollen eyes. Though he was still wearing his gun he had been afraid to attempt to use it, for the outlaw's second weapon still hung at his hip, and the rustler knew better than to take the chance! But now Fate had dealt him the winning card, for in falling, he had dropped upon Green's other Colt.

Taking no risk, he waited until Green was upon him before his right hand flashed into view and the gun roared. The impact of the heavy slug stopped the oncoming man like a blow and sent him reeling, but even as he fell his left hand streaked to his side, there came a flash and report from his hip and Tarman, with a choked cry, pitched forward on his face. Head to head the two men lay, while the girl stared at them in horror. Above, a mere speck in the sky, an eagle wheeled in ever-narrowing circles.

'Well, I reckon that was the prettiest scrap I ever seen, an' a right good finish.'
The harsh voice jarred the girl back to consciousness, and looking round, she saw Laban. Leisurely dismounting he walked to the body of his friend, callously turned it over, and snood contemplating it, a satirical grin on his thin lips.

'I reckon yo're good an' dead, Joe,' he said. 'Plumb between the eyes, a left-hand shot, an' him plugged too. Sudden shore deserved his reputation. Well, seein' as there ain't no one else, I guess I must be the missin' heir.' He looked malevolently at the girl. 'Not that I'm wantin' yu the way Joe was, but I reckon Old Simon'll pay somethin' no get yu back. As for him—he nodded towards the cowpuncher—'by Gosh! he ain't gone yet—he's breathin'.'
Running to the girl he slashed her bonds with a knife and pulled her from the saddle.

'Help me tie him up—he's worth ten thousand alive,' he ordered. 'An' don't try no tricks for I'd as soon shoot yu as not.'

The threat was not necessary, for Noreen's one anxiety was to help the wounded man. An examination of his hurt showed that the bullet had entered the right side of the chest, fairly high up, and had passed clean through. Strips from her underskirt and handkerchiefs supplied bandages, and Laban showed some skill in their adjustment. When this was done to his satisfaction he rose and grinned at her.

'He'll live to decorate a tree yet, if we can get him away from here. Fetch that hoss o' mine, he's quiet; we'll have to tie him on.'

'It will kill him,' the girl said indignantly.

'Do as you're told,' he snarled. 'Or—'

His threatening hand was still in the air when a quiet but meaning voice said, 'Put the other up too, Seth, an' keep 'em up.'

Laban knew that voice and his biceps were cuddling his ears when he faced round to find Snap Lunt standing, gun in hand, a bare dozen yards away. Busy with the bandaging, neither he nor the girl had noticed his approach. The little gunman's eyes were blazing and the expression on his face was that of a devil. Laban tried to temporise.

'Hello, Snap, yo're just in time to take Miss Petter home—I was wonderin' what to do with her,' he began. 'Joe an' Sudden had a mix up an'

'Step back, an' keep doin' it,' came the cold command, emphasised by the levelled gun. Laban, thinking the other merely wanted him further from the girl, obeyed, and for each step backward that he took, Lunt took one forward. So they went for perhaps twenty paces, and then Laban said: 'What's the idea, Snap? If yu got anythin' to say—' 'Keep movin',' was the stern reply.

Some instinct made the rustler glance over his shoulder and he suddenly shrieked. One more pace backward would have sent him over the precipice to crash upon the rocks hundreds of feet below. Shivering with fear he tried to edge forward away from the ghastly chasm.

'Back,' came the inexorable command, and a bullet tore off the upper part of an ear.

Flinging himself on his knees the miserable creature begged for mercy, crying aloud that he had not hurt the outlaw, whose wound he had bound up, that he had always liked Snap, and that he meant no harm to Noreen. He might as well have pleaded to a stone man. Snap took another step forward.

'Seth,' he said. 'Yu are agoin' over, dead or alive. Which is it to be?'

He meant it; the lust to kill was upon him, and he well knew that the grovelling wretch before him was as unfit to live as he was to die. But the sight was more than the girl could bear. She laid her hand on the gunman's arm.

'Please let him go, Snap,'-she begged. 'He has not harmed me, and whatever his motive, he bound up Mr. Green's wound. Perhaps he will go straight in future.'

'Huh! 'bout as straight as a corkscrew,' Lunt growled. 'He's a bad lot an' yo're doin' the world a poor service turnin' him loose on it agin, but yu don't have to ask me twice for anythin', Miss Norry, an' that goes.'

He walked no Laban took away his gun, and pointed up the pass. 'Get,' he said. 'An' remember this, next time we meet yu better see me first for I'll be shootin' on sight.'

'Yu ain't turnin' me loose afoot an' without grub, are yu?' quavered Laban.

'Make tracks,' ordered the gunman. 'Yu got yore life an' that's all I'm givin' yu.'

Having watched the broken rustler stagger up the pass and vanish round a bend, Snap turned his attention to the problem of getting the sick man home. Green was conscious—he even essayed a grin when he saw Lunt—and he also grasped the situation.

'Tie me to the saddle,' he said. 'I reckon I can make it.'

With both of them helping, and by making a supreme effort which brought the sweat in beads to his brow, he managed to climb to the back of Laban's pony, which appeared to be the most docile. Then with the girl on one side, and Snap, leading the spare horse, on the other, they began the journey. Never will Noreen forget those hours of torture. Compelled to move at a walking pace, constantly watching that the wounded man did not slip from the saddle, the ordeal seemed endless. Ere a mile had been traversed, Green's head sagged forward and he began to mutter. References to Tarman, Bill Evesham, and to Larry came indistinctly to her ears, and then she heard her own name, and blushed furiously while her heart sang.

'Don't yu heed him, Miss Norry,' said Lunt, when the delirious man ripped out an oath. 'He's out of his head, that's all.'

'This ride will kill him,' the girl replied anxiously. 'Do yu think the hurt is very bad?'

'Can't say, Miss Norry, but I've seen wuss,' Snap told her. 'I'm hopin' the lead has missed the lungs an' in that case he'll likely be as good as new in a month or two; he's a clean-liver an' tough as rawhide.'

Noreen rode on in silence. Only when she had seen him go down before Tarman's treacherous bullet had she realised what this nameless stranger with the terrible reputation really meant to her. She summed it up in one word—everything, and as she helped to hold the swaying, lurching form, with its death-white face, in the saddle, she prayed as she had never done before. Mile after mile they crawled and the patient drooped more and more over his saddlehorn until Noreen feared that he must collapse entirely.

She herself was little better and only the courage of despair enabled her to endure that terrible ride. At length, when it seemed that she could hold out no longer, came a cheerful word from Lunt :

'Yonder's the house,' he said. 'An' I reckon the dance is over.' He was right. When they presently rode into the clearing they found the attackers busy rounding up their mounts and preparing to depart. The shout which greeted their arrival brought Leeming on the run. Green, who had been lifted down and laid on a blanket, had a spell of sanity.

'Did yu get him?' asked the Frying Pan owner.

'Yes,' replied the puncher. 'Yu 'pear to have cleaned up here too.'

'All but them, an' they won't take long,' said Job grimly, pointing to a group of five men, sitting on their horses but with their hands bound behind them. One of these was West, and the rustler grinned cheerily when he saw Green looking at him.

'Good-bye, partner,' he called. 'Glad yu got her—an' him.' Painfully the hurt man raised himself on an elbow. 'That man goes free, Job,' he said. 'He saved my life an' turned me loose to follow Tarman.'

'He was in the house with 'em,' Leeming said. 'He helped steal my cattle an' mebbe shot some o' my men.'

'Aw, partner, I'll take my medicine with the rest,' the Californian said.

'He goes free,' Green repeated stubbornly. 'But for him I'd be cashed, an' Miss Norry ' Leeming gave in, and when the condemned were conducted into the forest by half a dozen of the Frying Pan boys the Californian was not among them. To the surprise of his captors, however, he made no attempt to get away.

'I'm stayin' around,' he explained to Larry. 'I reckon I'll be able to thank him when he's good an' well again.'

For having paid his debt to the rustler, Green had lapsed into unconsciousness, and was giving his friends a good deal of anxiety.

CHAPTER XXIV

SOME three weeks later it was 'visiting day' at the Y Z ranch-house; for the first time since he had been carried there, a limp, unconscious form, Green was allowed to see his friends. One at a time the punchers came into the room, chatted for a few moments and then, at a nod from Noreen, who was in charge of the invalid, went out again. Stereotyped as the inquiries and wishes were, the girl sensed the genuine feeling which prompted them, and her pride in her patient grew. The pale-faced man, propped up by pillows, had a smile for all and there was a look in his eyes which told the girl that he too realised the affection beneath the awkwardness. When West came in and gripped his hand, all the usually loquacious Californian could find to say was: 'I'm thankin' yu, partner.'

'S'pose we call it square,' suggested the sick man.

West shook his head. 'Not yet,' he said, and then, 'I'm stayin' here.'

'I'm right pleased,' Green replied. 'I was hopin' yu would.'

Then came Old Simon, who had nearly recovered, and with him Job Leeming. The Frying Pan owner, having regained his cattle, and as he put it, 'cleaned up the country,' was in the best of humours. He grinned at the occupant of the bed.

'Humph!' he remarked. 'I shall certainly know where to come for a nurse when I get shot up.' 'Miss Noreen has been wonderful; I reckon I wouldn't 'a'made the grade but for her,' Green replied, and the girl flushed at the warmth in his tone and the look which accompanied the words. Job's eyes went from one to the other. Then, with a chuckle, he said :

'I've been havin' an argument with Simon here, an' I'd like yore opinion, Green. Three o' my best punchers, who came to me after bein' given their time at the Y Z, want to renig an' come back, an' Simon is encouragin' them revolutionary notions. I say it ain't fair.'

Green looked at the twinkling eyes and his own crinkled at the corners as he replied :

'Mebbe it ain't, but it's cold common sense all the same. We shore can't get along without Ginger, Dirty, an' Simple.' 'We can't, eh?' queried the other.

'He's the new foreman o' the Y Z, on shares,' explained Old Simon. 'I figure I owe him that.'

'Yu shore do an' then some,' returned his friend bluntly. 'But durn me if I ever see such a feller as yu for grabbin' everythin' in sight. Here's me short-handed, an' wantin' a housekeeper—' He looked quizzically at the girl, who laughed and shook her head at him. 'As I said, grabbin' ' everythin',' he repeated, and then, more soberly, 'Say, yu ain't forgettin' that our friend here is totin' a past, are yu?'

The abrupt reminder swept the merriment from their faces, but before anyone could speak, the door opened and in walked Tonk. Close on his heels came Larry.

'The marshal insisted on comin' up an' not wantin' to start a ruckus, I let him,' announced the puncher. 'If yu say the word, boss, I'll be pleased to throw him out on his ear.'

'It's all right, Larry,' replied the ranch-owner quietly, and when the puncher had regretfully withdrawn, 'What do you want, Tonk?'

'That,' replied the marshal, pointing to the sick man, his pig-like eyes gloating over the ravages illness had left behind. 'He is still too weak to be moved,' Noreen said, her face almost as white as that of her charge.

'Oh, I reckon not; yu don't have to be fit an' well to be hanged, anyway.' The brutal retort brought Old Simon to his feet, one hand on his gun, and the marshal shrank back. 'Now, see here, Simon,' he protested, 'it ain't no use yu a-kickin' agin the law. That feller is wanted, an' I got a posse of a dozen outside a-waitin' to take him.'

The rancher sank back in his chair. 'What yu aimin' to do with him?' he asked.

'Tote him to Big Rock, an' then by rail to the capital—they got a fine gaol there,' was the reply.

'Surely you can wait until he's fit to travel,' the girl said indignantly.

'An' give yu a chance to turn him loose agin?' sneered the officer. 'No, he comes with me now.'

'He does not,' rasped Simon. 'Get the boys together, Job: we'll call this feller's bluff.'

The old man's eyes were blazing, and Leeming, whose touchy temper needed but a spark, was already on his feet when a calm voice from the bed interposed: 'As the most interested party in this discussion, I reckon I oughtta have a say in it,' the invalid began. 'There's no need to call the boys. If Miss Norry will hand me my vest...'

The marshal's hand flew to his pistol 'Yu give him his gun an' he dies now,' he screamed at

the girl.

'Don't be a fool, Tonk; I've had yu covered since yu came in,' retorted the puncher. 'It don't need a gun to crush a toad like yu.'

Over the edge of the sheet peeped the muzzle of a Colt, and the marshal's hand came away from his gun-butt with laughable celerity. Green took the garment the girl passed to him, tore open the lining, and produced some papers and a shining metal star which he tossed on the bed cover.

'That's the badge of a deputy-sheriff, an' here's my authority to wear it, duly made out an' signed by Governor Bleke,' he said. 'That gives me the power to arrest yu if I want to, marshal.'

With a shaking hand the officer picked up the document; it might be a bluff, but a glance showed him that it was genuine.

'But yo're Sudden, the outlaw,' he stammered. 'I reckon the Governor don't know
'Let me tell yu a little story, marshal,' interrupted the man in the bed. 'Some years ago there was a couple o' men I was anxious no meet up with.' He smiled at the rest of his audience. 'Not knowin' where they'd drifted to, it meant p'raps a long search, an' I'd gotta live. Well, I heard that the Governor was lookin' for a feller to weed out certain gangs o' desperadoes who were gettin' too busy in the country, an' I reckoned the two jobs, mine an' his, would fit in, so I applied and was appointed. I didn't flash my star about as much as some folks, in fact, nobody knew I was a deputy, so I soon got a reputation as a bad man; every crime that couldn't be otherwise explained was plastered on me, though sometimes I was hundred o' miles from where it happened.

I talked it over with the Governor an' we figured it would help me in my work to let the cards go as they lay, but he gave orders that Sudden was to be taken alive an' sent to him; that was for my protection. So yu see, marshal, the Governor knows all about me, an' here's a letter from him in reply to one I sent a while ago from Big Rock, askin' me to come an' see him as soon as I've cleaned up here.'

He tossed another paper towards the pop-eyed, staggered officer, but that hitherto pompous person allowed it to flutter to the ground unheeded. His chicken-hearted body was waiting for the blow he knew was coming.

'P'raps yu don't know Governor Bleke,' resumed the puncher easily. 'A mighty nice man, marshal, though lawbreakers, I've heard, find him pretty aptly named. I'm bettin' he'll want to see yu, 'specially when I show him certain papers we found on Tarman an' Poker Pete. They didn't pay yu any too well, did they, marshal, but I s'pose yu were to share in the plunder?'

At this direct charge the usually purplish face of the badgered bully turned to a bluish tinge. He tried to utter a denial but his shaking lips refused to do their office. All his bluster was gone and he resembled nothing so much as a pricked bladder. The cowpuncher surveyed him with disgust for a few moments, and then said reflectively: 'Dunn as he'd thank me, after all—yu ain't a very pleasant sight. If I was yu, Tonk, I'd travel; they say it improves the mind an', Gawd knows, yores needs a lot o' that. So yu better take steps—long, quick ones—for another stamping-ground.' He suddenly dropped his sardonic, bantering tone, and pointing to the door, said harshly, 'Get! an' remember this, if I find yu pollutin' the scenery when I'm around again, I'll—wipe—yuout.'

Utterly cowed and broken, the marshal lurched unsteadily from the room. As the door closed

behind him the invalid said, 'Well, that's the last of 'em. There's a few sots in Hatchett's that backed the marshal for the drink he bought 'em, but I'm gamblin' they'll be good now.'
'I allus reckoned Tonk wasn't straight, but I didn't guess Tarman bought him,' Simon said.
'That feller was swingin' a wide loop for a rustler.'

'Tarman wasn't after cattle—he only wanted them to pay his men,' Green said. 'He was aimin' for the land. His plan was to steal the Y Z an' starve the Frying Pan down to his figure, an' then pay for it with a bullet, like as not. Have yu ever thought what yore land would be worth if the railway extended the Big Rock to Hatchett's Folly?'
Leeming whistled. 'So that was it, eh? But it ain't likely.'
'It's all that, an' Tarman knew,' Green assured him.
'Well, young feller, yu keep a-pilin' up the debt,' Simon said. 'An' I don't see no way o' payin' it. Me an' Job was figurin' that Suddesh would want our influence with the Governor, but seems like yu got more than we have. I'm almighty glad of it too.'
Someone else was 'almighty glad' and the soft eyes which rested on the sick man made no secret of it. While he smilingly protested that there was no debt, she noticed that one hand was fumbling at his throat in search of something.

'Is this what you are looking for?' she asked, holding up a narrow strip of rawhide upon which hung a flat little locket of gold, with a steer's head engraved on one side. 'It was round your neck when you got hurt, the bullet had cut the thong almost through, and I feared it would get lost,' she explained.
'Where d'yu get that?'

With the words Old Simon almost snatched the trinket from the girl's grasp; his trembling fingers found a secret spring and the locket flew open, disclosing a miniature of a young and pretty woman. One glance and the old man dropped into his chair as though shot.
'My God !' he groaned, and sat gazing at the portrait in his hand. Then he looked at the puncher, and said, 'I'm askin' how yu come by this?'

'I've allus had it—long as I can remember. I kept it hidden, even Bill Evesham never saw it. The Piute squaw who brought me up guessed it was a picture o' my mother.'
'An' o' my wife,' said Old Simon. 'Our baby, Donald, was wearin' it the day he disappeared.'
He held out his hands to the man in the bed. 'Son, son, can yu ever forgive me? If it hadn't been for Norry, I'd have handed yu over to the hangman.'

The old man's voice shook with emotion and Green saw that in his weakened state he was perilously near to breaking down. Shaken to the depths himself by the revelation, he thrust aside his own feelings, and called up one of his whimsical smiles.
'Why as to that, seh,' he said softly, 'I reckon we break even; I came here to shoot yu.'
Leeming saw the puncher's object and promptly backed him up. 'But yu didn't, an' yu wouldn't have,' he said cheerily. 'Somethin' would've stopped yu. Providence is shore mysterious. Why, Simon, don't yu recollect tellin' me yu couldn't help likin' this feller, even when yu thought he was stealin' yore cows?'

'I did, an' I couldn't understand it,' Simon admitted. 'An' his face at times seemed familiar, though I couldn't place it, but he favours his mother—yu can all see it now.'
They could; looking from the portrait to the invalid it was easy to trace the likeness. The cowpuncher told the story of his youth as he knew it. His early wanderings over the country with the Indian horse-dealer and his band of ponies, of his adoption by Evesham and life on

his ranch, until the treachery of Webb robbed his benefactor of everything and practically killed him. Of his vow of vengeance and the troubled trail it forced him to follow. Finally, how Governor Bleke, hearing of the rustling, had sent him to Hatchett's Folly. When the story was ended, Old Simon rose and clasped the teller by the hand.

'Son, I'm feelin' plumb ashamed,' he said. 'If yu had shot me it would've been only just, but I reckon if what the preachers tell us is right, Bill Evesham knows the truth now an' understands. To think it should have been him that found yu. I can't never forgive myself.'

His voice trembled and broke, and both Noreen and Leeming saw that the events of the last hour had shaken him to the core. They exchanged a meaning glance, and then Job said : 'Come along, old friend, I reckon the patient has had all the excitement he can stand for the present. Yu an' me'll go down an' tell the boys, an' we'll all drink the health of yore son, Donald.'

'An' my daughter,' Simon added, with a fond look at the girl. 'It ain't goin' to make any difference, Norry, is it?'

She flung her arms round his neck. 'Of course not, you dear old silly,' she replied brightly.

'Now you run along or I shall have two of you on my hands again.'

She hustled them out of the room and returned to her place at the head of the bed. Her patient, leaning back against the pillows, appeared to be thinking deeply. Presently he spoke, with the slow drawl she had come to associate with his whimsical moods.

'This findin' o' parents is a right upsettin' business,' he stated. 'Larry will smile—he christened me Don—claimed I was a born disturber o' yore sex; but he was wrong there, I never had any time for women.'

'Except the Pretty Lady, of course,' the girl ventured.

The puncher smiled. 'Now who could have told yu about her?' he questioned.

'Yu told me yourself when you were feverish,' she replied, blushing under the scrutiny he gave her.

'I guess I talked a lot o' nonsense—a man is apt to at them times,' he reflected, and when she did not rise to the bait he went off at a tangent. 'Tarman would 'a' finished me if yu hadn't made yore hoss jump; he wasn't shore.'

Before she could reply, a burst of cheering and a volley of pistol shots shattered the air. The girl started up in alarm, but the patient was smiling.

'He has told the boys, an' I reckon they're pleased,' he said. 'I wish he had waited.'

'But why?' she asked, unable to follow this new line of thought.

'It'll make it harder when I go,' he replied, and when she stared at him in bewilderment, he added almost fiercely, Did yu figure I'd stay here an' rob yu o' yore inheritance—yu who have been a real daughter to him all these years? Why, I'd be near as bad as Tarman.'

'But it would break his heart to lose you again,' she cried, conscious that she was fighting too for her own happiness. 'He had been the kindest of fathers to me, but always he has grieved for the boy who should have been here to follow him.'

The puncher lay silent for a while, thinking, but watching the thin, set face, the girl knew that her pleading had not succeeded; he had solved the problem according to his own idea of right and wrong. When he spoke again she knew she had read him correctly.

'It shore is tough, but I can't stay here an' take yore ranch,' he said dully. 'I gotta go—it's the on'y trail out.'

Noreen had come to a decision. Smiling tremulously, she laid a hand on his, and whispered :
'Are you sure—Don? Couldn't we stop talking of my ranch, your ranch, and agree to think of
it as—ours?'

For a moment he did not comprehend, and then his hand closed over hers, and before the
light in his eyes she hid her rosy face in his shoulder.

'Girl,' he whispered huskily, 'do yu mean it?' Then, though he got no answer, his arms stole
round her, and he muttered : 'This shore has got me beat.'

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